

# THE BENGALI EAST END

Histories of life and work in Tower Hamlets



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## Introduction from the Mayor of Tower Hamlets

Bangladeshis have been living in the borough for more than 400 years and this booklet is aimed at celebrating the unique contribution they have made in shaping culture, food, fashion and history in the East End.

We are committed to playing our part in ensuring everyone can experience the rich history and cultures present in this vibrant borough.

The life stories and achievements recounted in this booklet will, I am sure, inspire many people to take an active part in this month's celebrations and encourage everyone to discover more about the Bengali community who have lived and worked here for hundreds of years.

We extend a warm thank you to all the community groups, arts organisations and individuals who have contributed their histories to this booklet and for their continuing time, effort and enthusiasm.

I hope this will enable residents to appreciate the rich and interesting heritage of the Bengali community.

Mayor Lutfur Rahman  
Tower Hamlets Council

### About this booklet

This booklet was compiled by staff at Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives as part of an ongoing project to fill gaps in its collections and ensure that the council's archives reflect the histories of Bangladeshi residents.

The biographies and profiles contained within this booklet are intended to illustrate just a few of the stories that form part of the history of the Bengali East End. Included are profiles of people who live and work in the borough today, or people who, both long ago or in the more recent past, played a significant part in the establishment of the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets. This is by no means a definitive collection, and the archive continues to seek out the evidence of Bangladeshi experience in Tower Hamlets in all its breadth and variety. The opinions expressed in the testimonies collated in this booklet belong to the individuals concerned, and not to Tower Hamlets Council.

The biographies are contextualised with a brief introduction to the history of Bangladeshi people in Tower Hamlets. Details of archive and local history sources which reflect and illustrate the presence of Bangladeshi people in the borough are also included.

To share your story with the archive, email: [localhistory@towerhamlets.gov.uk](mailto:localhistory@towerhamlets.gov.uk) or call 020 7364 1290.

# Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives



Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives covers the area of the present-day London Borough of Tower Hamlets and until 1965, the former boroughs of Bethnal Green, Poplar and Stepney, which had been collecting materials since their creation in 1901. It collects, preserves and makes accessible materials in a variety of formats, which document the history of the borough and the rich cultural diversity of its people.

These include electoral registers, which date from 1910 to 2010; listing individuals that were eligible to vote in parliamentary and local government elections, it is organised by constituency and divided into polling districts. There are over 20,000 printed books and pamphlets from the seventeenth century to the present day, providing extensive coverage of the many differing aspects of the recorded history of Tower Hamlets. The cuttings collection, which is contained in over 400 boxes, includes newspapers, periodical cuttings, articles and printed ephemera, a substantial amount of which dates from the nineteenth century.

The library also holds about 35,000 illustrations, mainly photographs of general street scenes arranged alphabetically; the remainder of the collection is arranged by subject. There are over 4000 maps and plans, which date from the Elizabethan times to the present day and include large-scale Ordnance Survey maps, street plans and some parish estate maps. Additionally, copies of census returns for the whole borough between 1841-1901, and various local newspapers from 1853 can be consulted. Parish registers of the oldest parish churches and London trade directories can be accessed on microfilms. There are over 100 sound recordings and 60 films and videos of local interest in the audio visual collections.

Tower Hamlets Archives holds extensive records of the borough and its predecessors, dating in some cases from the sixteenth century. These include minutes, rate books and correspondence files. There are over 8,000 deeds recording the transfer of properties in the borough which are indexed by name and place. The archives of a growing number of local organisations, including institutions, places of worship, schools, local clubs, societies and businesses are also held, as are the records of prominent individuals.

For more information on the materials available, the types of services we provide and to find out our opening times, please phone, email or visit our website.

Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives  
277 Bancroft Road, London, E1 4DQ  
tel: 020 7364 1290  
[www.ideastore.co.uk/en/articles/local\\_history](http://www.ideastore.co.uk/en/articles/local_history)  
email: [localhistory@tower.hamlets.gov.uk](mailto:localhistory@tower.hamlets.gov.uk)



# Bengali Collections

Explore the Bengali collections at Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

For books, press cuttings, pamphlets, and illustrations reflecting Bengali presence, please see the following classification numbers and subjects:

**015 Tower Hamlets and East London; 023 Spitalfields; 331 Housing; 360 Associations, Institutions, Social and Youth Clubs, Community Centre; 400 Ethnic Minorities, Immigrants, Race Relations; 440 Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Lascars; 820 Schools (Primary and Secondary) and 890 Newspapers, Periodicals.**

Please see below for some notable Bengali collections:

**P/ADM Papers of Caroline Adams (1949-2001) chiefly relating to her book, 'Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers'**

Including research papers, notes, transcripts and audio cassette tapes.

**I/AVU Records of Avenues Unlimited (Tower Hamlets Youth and Community Project) re: Community Work in Spitalfields**

Including files of different Bengali-related organisations.

**I/SPP Spitalfields Project Papers**

Including files, correspondences, annual reports and constitutions for most of the Bengali-related organisations from the late 1970s and 1980s.

Since 2011, the Bengali collections have been rapidly developed and now incorporate audio-visual collections as well as digital materials. There are over 20 digital collections, principally photographs, showing different activities and events held by Bengali-related organisations, centres and the community, dating from 1969 to present. There are 10 oral history recordings from some of the members and founders of local youth organisations which emerged following the murder of Altab Ali in May 1978.

Please see below for some of our newly acquired materials:

**I/BRA Records of Banglatown Restaurants Association**

**I/EME Records of Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project**

**I/KNC Records of Kobi Nazrul Centre**

**I/TTF Records of Tower Hamlets Training Forum**

**S/BYL Records of Bangladesh Youth League**

**P/MIS/357 Papers of Mahmoud A Rauf**

**P/MIS/358 Original Works of Alice Sielle**

**P/MIS/359 John Eade's Collection**

**P/MIS/360 Bengali Info**

**P/MIS/361 Paper re: Baishakhi Mela, Brick Lane Festival, Altab Ali Memorial Foundation and Altab Ali Day**

**P/MIS/362 John Eversley's Collections**

Please note that some materials may have public access restrictions in place.

For more information on the Bengali collections, please email:

localhistory@towerhamlets.gov.uk or phone 020 7364 1271

# Bengali History in Tower Hamlets

## Beginnings

Bengali presence in Tower Hamlets can be traced to the seventeenth century when the East India Company began trading in South Asia. Entries of baptisms and burials in parish registers indicate that there were a significant number of Bengali people settled in East London.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, employment of Bengali servants in British households became customary, and an increasing number were dismissed by families once ashore. With nowhere to go, many came to stay in lodgings in Whitechapel and Wapping and resorted to begging. In 1897, the Ayahs' Home at 6 Jewry Street, Aldgate was founded and became the equivalent of an employment agency.



*The Strangers Home. West India Dock Road, c1857*

Asian seamen, often referred to as lascars, contributed to the Bengali population. They were employed on steam ships by the East India Company and Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company at a time when East Bengal was developing into a major tea-growing district. Many local people felt threatened by lascars taking their jobs; they were seen as dirty and thought of as thieves. The language barrier and low employment prospects meant Bengali lascars were isolated and destitute. From 1795, temporary bases were set up to accommodate them. By 1801, three

premises in Shoreditch, Hackney and Shadwell were converted to lodgings. Eventually, all were merged into one house in Shadwell, which was later moved to Ratcliffe Highway (now known as The Highway).

These lodgings however were notorious for their abysmal conditions. Often overcrowded, many lascars were ill-fed and badly treated; early death was common. A Society for the Protection of Asian Sailors emerged in 1814, to investigate living conditions, which raised an awareness of the lascars' plight. Circumstances did not change until the Home for Asiatic, Africans, South Sea Islanders and Others, also known as the Strangers' Home was established in June 1857, in West India Dock Road, Limehouse. Local women also began to open their houses as boarding homes and some ended up marrying their Bengali lodgers. Records show, in 1873, the existence of two boarding houses in Wapping.

By 1918, there was an established settlement of ex-seamen in what is now Tower Hamlets. In the early twentieth century, Bengali sailors would frequently jump ship in London and would seek out fellow Bengalis to stay with. In Spitalfields, 13 Sandy's Row, known to the Bengalis simply as 'Number Thirteen' was the most popular. This was

owned and operated by Ayub Ali, who gave shelter and food to the lascars alongside other assistance.

Ayub Ali set up a 'curry café' at 76 Commercial Road in the 1920s, followed by the Shah Jalal restaurant in 1935. Other Bengali restaurateurs followed suit. Hajji Taslim Ali, the proprietor of the first Halal butchers, later became the Imam of East London Mosque. Taj Stores, still operating at 112 Brick Lane, was the first Bengali grocery store, established in 1936 by Bengali seaman Abdul Jabber on Hunton Street (now Buxton Street).

### The post-war period

This period saw the largest influx of Bengali people migrating to the East End; Commonwealth countries were granted free entry into the UK, and workers came from all over the Indian subcontinent. This population was largely confined to Spitalfields, especially Brick Lane, and most planned to earn money and return home. A second wave of Bengali immigration took place in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, families were able to fly directly from Dhaka, enabling wives and children to join their husbands in London.



*Bengali Tailors, Bethnal Green, 1970s*

Bengali arrivals found the principal source of employment was in the clothing industry. Primarily located in Spitalfields and Whitechapel, manufacturing firms often recruited through word of mouth. Bengalis worked in physically demanding jobs as flat machinists and pressers, on average working 70 hours per week. Poverty compelled Bengali wives to join the labour market and work at home, chiefly machining linings.



*Demonstration, Brick Lane, 1978*

Whilst racial tensions were nothing new for East End communities, extreme right-wing political activities came to a head in the 1970s, with violence against the Bengali community, serious assaults and racially motivated murders; 1978 was dubbed the 'Battle of Brick Lane' as racist youths smashed windows and threw bottles at Bengali shops and cars. This year was a turning point for Tower Hamlets. The murder of 25 year old Bengali

# Bengali History

machinist, Altab Ali, provoked a grassroots campaign to resist racism and the presence of the National Front in Brick Lane. The publication of the 'Blood on the Streets' report by the local Trades Council prompted people to support the Bengali community; many participating in demonstrations during the summer of 1978, against the National Front's attempts to sell racist literature at the junction of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road.

Another issue faced by the Bengali community was housing. Families endured appalling conditions in cramped, unsanitary buildings which often lacked basic amenities. A move to new and better council housing was often accompanied by racial harassment from their new neighbours. Preferring to face extreme discomfort or homelessness, many gave up their tenancies and returned to their old houses. Bengalis increasingly began to squat in council houses such as Aston Street, Nelson Street and Varden Street.

As the 1970s progressed, cafes and restaurants proliferated in this area, serving food cooked in a mix of British, Indian and Bengali styles. The restaurant trade is now a significant contributor to the local economy and to employment opportunities for local Bangladeshis and Brick Lane, now synonymous with curry, has been re-branded Curry Capital 2012, in preparation for the Olympics.



*Bengali children, Brick Lane, 1978*

## Community support

Attitudes towards the Bengali population improved steadily towards the end of the twentieth century, thanks to the efforts of a number of institutes, campaigning groups and other organisations. During late 1970s and 1980s, Bengali Spitalfields Housing Action Group, Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service, Spitalfields Housing Association and Mitali Housing Association all strove to provide decent housing for the Bengali community.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Greater London Council (GLC) and Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) awarded grants to schemes designed to help the Bengali community, such as Avenues Unlimited and Spitalfields Project. The

provision of social, educational and cultural activities for Bengali people grew with the formation of various local youth organisations and institutions.

Additionally, several organisations concerned with community relations were created in the 1980s: Tower Hamlets Council for Racial Equality, Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice and Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality.

In 1988, after demand from the local community, St Mary's Gardens, the small park adjacent to Whitechapel Road, was renamed Altab Ali Park. In 1989, Tower Hamlets



Council commissioned artist David Peterson to make a wrought iron arch for the entrance of the park, now known as Altab Ali Arch. Both of these pay tribute to the turning point for the community in their campaign against racism and commemorate the murder of Altab Ali and other victims of racial hatred.

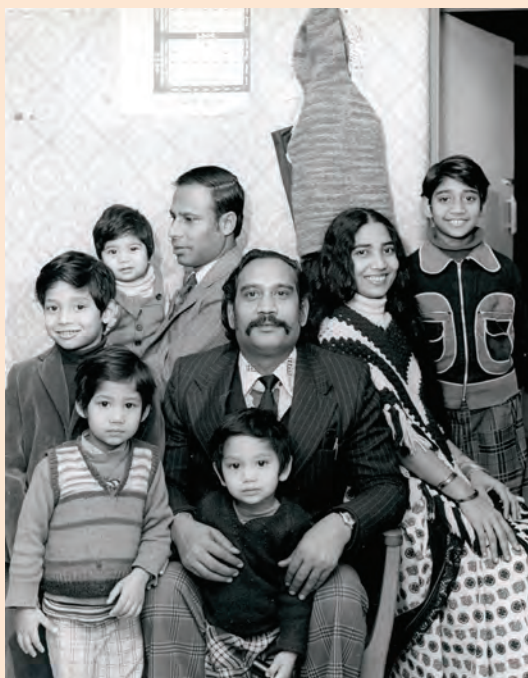
Supplementary education centres like the East End Community School, in Old Castle Street, taught subjects not offered in British state schools, enabling Bengali children to learn the Bengali language and their cultural and religious identity, as well as core subjects within the National Curriculum. Bangladeshi Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets (BENTH), a Bangladeshi educational pressure group, identified specific Bengali educational needs and assisted the ILEA to plan and implement actions that met them.



*Street market, Toynbee Street, 1987*

The Kobi Nazrul Centre, established in 1982, was the first purpose-built community centre which included a library and offered a meeting place for individuals and families. The centre celebrated important Bengali events; providing a programme of cultural dramas, musicals, dance, poetry, arts and crafts.

A number of organisations were set up which assisted the community in overcoming the lack of opportunities, language barriers and economic hardship. One of these was Tower Hamlets Training Forum, initially set up to teach skills needed in the manufacturing industry in 1977 but later provided English classes for adults and in other areas of employment in 1980s. The Forum also offered similar provisions for women and classes with women teachers and crèche facilities.



*The Miah family, Woodseer St, 1970s*

By the 1980s, there were two Bengali women's groups functioning in Tower Hamlets, Bengali Mahila Samity and Nari Samity; by the late 1980s, they had established centres at 5 Chicksand House and 6-7 White's Row respectively. These organisations offered women social, religious and cultural activities and organised outings, cultural functions and get-togethers as well as group activities, language classes and craft classes that were instrumental in encouraging Bengali women to take an active role in the community. In the 1980s, Jagonari Women's Education Resource Centre was established in Whitechapel. Founded by a collective of four South Asian

women, Shila Thakor, Alma Chowdhury, Mithu Ghosh and Pola Uddin, the Jagonari Centre continues to actively serve the community today. It provides education and support facilities for Bengali women with employment, training, educational, recreational and social opportunities and daytime childcare.

### **Religion, culture and heritage**

The principal place of worship for local Bengali Muslims is the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid, a Grade 2\* listed building on the corner of Fournier Street and Brick Lane. Originally established in 1743, as a church serving the French Huguenot weavers of Spitalfields, and later a Methodist chapel, it was adapted in 1897, to become Spitalfields Great Synagogue. In 1976, the building was again converted this time into the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid. An illuminated steel minaret-like structure, featuring an intricate metalwork pattern, makes visible the building's landmark status.

The area's other major place of worship is the East London Mosque. In 1975, the Mosque was given land and temporary facilities by the Greater London Council at its current location on Whitechapel Road. In 1985, the Mosque was rebuilt on this site; the building now featuring a large dome and minaret. In 2004, the adjacent London Muslim Centre opened, providing additional facilities for the local community.

Bengali people living in the East End also created resources and opportunities to engage in leisure and cultural activities. In 1966, the Palaseum Cinema in Commercial Road, converted from what had once been a Jewish theatre, began to show Bengali and Bollywood films, and was quickly followed by others including the Naz Cinema on Brick Lane and Bangladesh Cinema Hall on Commercial Road. Bengali newspapers such as Janomot, established in the 1960s, were joined by Notin Dun and Surma in the 1980s, helping to reduce language barriers and isolation by enabling Bengalis to find out what was happening in Tower Hamlets as well as in Bangladesh.

Since 1998, the Baishakhi Mela has been held in Tower Hamlets to celebrate the Bengali New Year. This promotes Bengali culture and identity amongst the local community and attracts audiences from outside the area. It is day filled with musical performances as well as cultural shows, foods, crafts and community stalls, inspired by Bangladesh. Similar events such as the Brick Lane Festival and the the Curry Festival take place each year, fostering community pride.



*Baishakhi Mela, 1998*

The Shaheed Minar, also known as Martyrs' Monument, lies in Altab Ali Park. It commemorates five Bengali men shot dead on 21 February 1952. A monument in support of the right to use the Bengali tongue, it encapsulates an important aspect of Bangladesh's history and holds a deep cultural significance to Bengalis. In February 1999, the Bengali language was officially recognised by the United Nations and the 21 February was declared as International Mother Language Day, an event observed globally. The Shaheed Minar, unveiled on 17 February 1999, was the culmination of a partnership between local Bengali organisations and Tower Hamlets Council. Every year, a remembrance ceremony takes place at the park.

Since the 1970s, a number of local buildings and housing estates have been given Bengali names in honour of prominent members of the community. These include the Shahjalal Estate and Fakhruddin Street, and schools including Osmani Primary School, named after the Commander of Bengali freedom fighters, Col. M A G Osmani.

### **The twenty-first century**

The local community has maintained many of the customs and traditions of Bangladesh. There are many shops located across Tower Hamlets offering authentic Bengali sweetmeats; in 1936, only one shop sold Bengali produce, there are now hundreds offering exotic vegetables, fruits, fish and Halal meat. The most renowned of these are located in Chapman Street, known to the locals as 'Fish Bazaar', where Bengalis from other boroughs and cities come to shop. Likewise, Whitechapel Market has over 80 stalls and offers a range of food; it is also a place where Bengali clothing such as salwar kameez and sarees can be purchased.

The Bengali population currently make up the largest ethnic minority community in Tower Hamlets. Many residents have entered mainstream politics and today Tower Hamlets Council has the largest number of Bengali councillors in the UK. In 2001, the electoral ward of Spitalfields was renamed Spitalfields and Banglatown in recognition of the largest Bengali settlement in the UK. Brick Lane is now adorned in the colours of Bangladesh and street names are also written in Bengali scripts.

### **References and further reading**

Most information in this brief overview was taken from the following sources:

'Bengalis in London's East End' by Ansar Ahmed Ullah and John Eversley, published by The Swadhinata Trust in 2010.

'Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indian in Britain 1700 – 1947' by Rozina Visram, published by Pluto Press Limited in 1986.

'Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers' by Caroline Adams, published by THAP in 1987.



## Caroline Adams 1949 - 2001

### Youth and community worker

Caroline Adams was a truly remarkable woman who merits a place in the East End's long tradition of radical social pioneers. Working as a volunteer in the refugee camps during the Bangladesh War of Independence, she fell in love with Bengali culture. Returning to England, she took a job as a youth worker with the Avenues Unlimited project in Spitalfields and devoted much of the rest of her life to working with the rapidly growing Bangladeshi

community in and around Brick Lane and Tower Hamlets. She was probably the first professional youth worker in Britain to focus primarily on the emerging community of young Bengalis in the East End of London. Her tireless energy and fluent Bengali made her a friend and lifeline for hundreds of women and children, giving them the confidence and courage to reach out beyond their isolation.

After Avenues Unlimited, Caroline became a youth officer in Tower Hamlets, but she was much more than a dedicated community worker. She was an articulate and effective champion of change, passionate in her belief that Bangladeshi families could integrate into the life of British society without sacrificing their own cultural heritage. She helped many, particularly young adults, to see that they could build the kind of social, cultural and political organisations that would serve the needs of the community, just as the Jews and other earlier groups of immigrants to east London had done. Her book 'Thirteen Rivers and Seven Seas' told the heroic stories of some of the first Bengali settlers in east London in the 1920s and 1930s and it was typical of her that when she was pressed to write a sequel, she argued that it was up to the young people of the Bangladeshi community to create and write their own history.

When she ended her professional career, she retained close and affectionate personal links with hundreds of Bangladeshi families all over London. It was during this time that Caroline researched and scripted a number of films. She worked with Ruhul Amin and Contrast Films on documentaries about Calcutta and Bangladesh.

Caroline was a tireless campaigner against racism and fascism and, after a British National Party councillor was elected in the Isle of Dogs, she co-wrote a booklet, 'Once Upon A Time In Docklands', about the myths and stereotypes which had helped racism to grow. This booklet contributed to the defeat of the BNP at the 1994 local elections. Caroline died of cancer, aged 52, a tragic loss to the harmony and vitality of the East End and, indeed, to the whole of London. It is certainly hard to imagine the East End without her, but her influence was profound, and it abides.

The booklet, book and associated papers can be viewed at Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.



## Ayub Ali 'Master' 1880 - 1980



Seamen outside Dunbar House, West India Dock Road, 1920s

Ayub Ali was born in 1880, in Sylhet. He went to sea before the First World War but jumped ship enroute to America in 1919, following an example of one of his relatives, who 'put all his belongings in a big saucepan and swam to shore with it'.

Settling in London in the 1920s, he opened the Shah Jalal Restaurant in Commercial Street. The café served as a hub for the Asian community. He also rented a house, 13 Sandys Row, which became famous among Bengali sailors from Sylhet, known as 'lascars', who called it 'Number Thirteen'. Seeing the number of lascars in London and their poor living conditions and health, Ayub Ali decided to help them. These sailors who had been labouring under particularly harsh and dangerous conditions aboard ship, were now hiding from their employers who had warrants out for their arrest, warrants that didn't expire for two years after their escape.

The police did not bother them, as they were citizens of British India and were legally allowed to come ashore. Their only offence was breaking contracts with their employers. Ayub Ali gave these men shelter and food as they were penniless, due to the shipping companies' rule of paying men upon completion of their contracts. He also helped the sailors to register at India House and at the local police station; applying for ration cards and identity cards. Later, when they had found employment, Ayub Ali would rent rooms to them whilst still helping with administration and financial concerns. They called Ayub Ali 'Master', as he could read and write.

In 1943, Ayub Ali formalized his social welfare work among lascars when he founded the Indian Seamen's Welfare League with Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi, in 1943. The organisation had its office in Christian Street and its stated aim was to look after the economic, social and cultural interests of Indian seamen, to provide them with recreation in Great Britain and to communicate with their relatives in India in the event of any misfortunes befalling them.

Ali was also involved with the East End branch of the India League (serving as treasurer at one point) whose meetings were frequently held in his café. He was also president of the UK Muslim League, reportedly mixing with Liaquat Ali Khan and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He went on to start up a travel agency business, Orient Travels, at 13 Sandys Row, which later moved to 96 Brick Lane.

Ayub Ali passed away after returning to Sylhet in April 1980, but was always remembered by those he helped. It was stated that 'there were plenty of others after him but nobody like him'.





## Akkaddas Ali

Local businessman

**“I arrived in London with £2 to my name, I managed to get a taxi to Tower Hamlets, the fare was my £2.”**

I was born in a small agricultural village called Jurapur, in Bangladesh. I grew up in time of extreme hardship, and with little to share between us. Despite this, I was always happy to distract myself with opportunities of gardening and the rare chance to play. I was always keen to run errands, as each task allowed me to explore and learn, but the further afield I went, the more I gained an unquenchable thirst to discover more about the world and the land beyond.

By the time I turned 23 years old, many changes began to take place in my home town; friends and family had started to travel to the UK in hope of a better life. I saw this as an opportunity to change my life and my family's. I applied for my visa; I now needed money to travel to foreign shores. I just about managed to earn two whole pounds to my name to take with me.

Despite my father's apprehension, I courageously headed to Dhaka. I looked at all that I would be leaving behind and shed a quiet tear for the love of my father and homeland. When I got to the airport, I was mesmerised by the sheer size of the plane and having never travelled on one, I prayed that I may live through the experience. We safely landed in Karachi, as there was no such thing as a direct flight to UK. I spent 3 days awaiting the next leg of my journey.

I arrived in the UK, at Heathrow, on the 31 December 1963; the great cold and fog engulfed me the moment I stepped off the plane. I managed to take a taxi to Tower Hamlets, the fare was my £2. I stayed with a family friend (in a road that no longer exists and a building that has now been torn down). I sat down to have my first unfamiliar meal, bread and butter. Tower Hamlets was at this point, heavily populated by the Jewish community; there were many factories and material outlets. Bangladeshi produce was nonexistent, it was impossible to find staples such as rice.

After a few weeks of disorientation, I travelled to Scunthorpe to seek work. Once I got there it was made clear that you could only get a job with a £50 deposit, money that I did not have. I waited patiently for 9 weeks. I was unable to get a job so I travelled to Luton; there were no jobs there either. I decided to travel to Bedford.

When I reached Bedford, there was work in a steel foundry. Sadly, I also lost my father during this time, it was a difficult for me, both financially and emotionally, but I was unable to return home.

I later went on to work in a welding factory, a screw factory and then a handbag factory. I regularly sent back much of the money I earned. I held this post and was able to secure the job and be allowed a holiday. In time, I had saved enough money to start renting my own room at 43 Fashion Street and even gained some shop space there. Now that I felt I had become someone, I took the chance to return to my homeland, and see my family. During this visit, I married my beautiful wife Aylun Nehar Ali.



I came back and carried on saving. Within a year, my wife and my eldest daughter came to join me. The East End still had difficult living conditions, and security could not be guaranteed. In order to be close to my growing family, I began to manage the shop space with my wife's help. I sent for my brother too; quickly, with my wife and brother involved in the business, we began to trade, selling fruit and veg. As the business grew so did the size of the shop.

We became Ali Brothers in 1970, obtaining Halal meat and Bangladeshi fish supplies, something that the East End did not offer as readily as today. This not only brought in customers from Greater London, but nationwide. Seeing my success as an opportunity to help others, I brought over members of my family to get involved in the business. By 1974, we were able to start importing goods directly from Bangladesh. This led to global sourcing, travelling to Thailand, Singapore, America, and Canada. We developed a chain of stores throughout Tower Hamlets.



*Ali's Super Store, Fashion Street, 2012*

The steady growth of the business allowed for me to start branching out into real estate. At the time, I managed to own much of Fashion Street and various other properties in east London and beyond. I even started a restaurant business. The success continued into the mid 1990s.

Aged 72, I feel that I have managed to gain all I have, through the blessings and prayers of my wonderful father Munish Nowaz Mamun. I continue to trade at the same site, now known as Ali's Superstores Limited. I have also been blessed with 5 daughters and a son. In 48 years, Tower Hamlets continues to be the back drop for most of my success, memories, and good fortunes.



## Kia Abdullah

Author and journalist

**“A household of noise, colour and activity is far better than possessions and privilege.”**

I have lived in five different boroughs across London town, but Tower Hamlets will always feel like home. Whether it is clashes of colour at Whitechapel Market or cheeky graffiti on Globe Road, the different faces and facets of this unique borough will always be close to my heart.

People are always shocked to find that I am one of eight children. They imagine poverty and misery, hardship and hand-me-downs. Of course I forfeited my fair share of material pleasures but – although I didn't always know it – a household of noise, colour and activity is far better than possessions and privilege. In times of quiet, I retreated into a good book, devouring stories of faraway lands. I cherished the escapism and started to write short stories of my own. It was one such story that prompted a teacher to take me aside one Christmas, hand me a pen and notepad, and tell me that, one day, I would become a writer.

For a while, it seemed his prediction was right. At 14 years old, I completed two weeks' work experience at the Sunday Times magazine. Two years later, I chose Media Studies as one of my A-Levels. Alas, at 18 years old, I decided to stop dreaming. A writing career is a luxury seldom afforded to young women from Tower Hamlets and so I chose a more sensible and sedate degree. Three years later, I graduated with a first in BSc Computer Science. As the only child of eight to graduate from university, I certainly made my family proud but my job in IT lacked the creativity I craved and thus I began to write my first book, 'Life, Love and Assimilation'. Three years later, in 2006, it was in the bookshops.

With the newfound confidence of a published author, I quit my day job and became a full-time writer. I contributed to a number of TV channels and publications including the BBC, Channel 4 and the Guardian. Three years later, my second novel, 'Child's Play', was published to a surprisingly positive reception. My first book had inspired much criticism for its examination of drugs and violence in Tower Hamlets. By the second novel, I assume people were used to my candid style.

I enjoyed the publicity, the articles, the interviews and invitations but, most of all, I enjoyed working with local schools to promote the importance of literacy. I don't like to call myself a 'role model' as I have made many mistakes in my life, but a small part of me does hope that I have inspired a young woman or two. I hope I've helped to show that we can aim high and dream big; that we can break stereotypes and change traditions; that we can be more than what is expected, even when we live and work in one of poorest areas in the country.





## Clare Murphy

### Community Development Worker at Avenues Unlimited

I came to Tower Hamlets in 1972, joining Avenues Unlimited, an innovative detached youth and community project, as a Community Development Worker. What I did not anticipate was staying here for the next three decades, nor continuing in the area voluntarily for another decade or more!

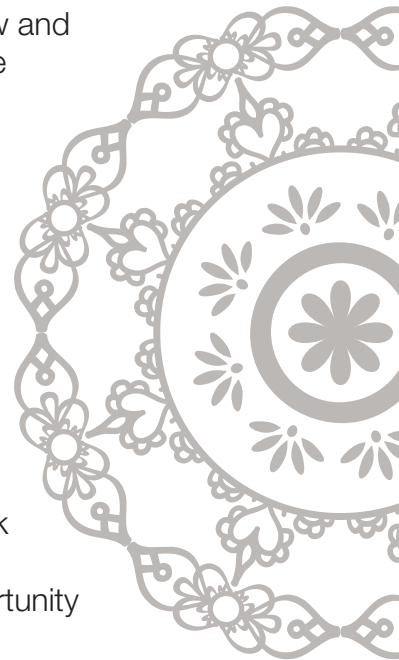
I undertook varied tasks and activities, all ensuring direct engagement with members of the Bangladeshi community. This meant I saw many of the issues that they faced.

An early strand of my work was delivering appropriate youth provision for the recently arrived young Bangladeshi men brought over by their uncles, brothers or fathers. These included English classes, drama, sports and other recreational activities; with advice and information in great demand too. I supported community activism, often taking along non-local Bengali young people who were outraged by racist attacks and keen to be counted in defence of their neighbours. I also helped with the legal representation of the Bengali community during the late 1970s clashes with the National Front.

I learnt that results were best achieved by getting residents together; using the strength of group action. Much of my work was in assisting residents to address their concerns in groups such as tenants' associations. Progress was often slow and issues ranged from re-housing tenants from unfit housing in slum clearance areas, to forcing essential repairs and maintenance to be undertaken. It was against this background that various local groups came together for neighbourhood meetings forming an umbrella group called Spitalfields Community Action Group.

The airing of local grievances paved the way for the Spitalfields Project, a regional government initiative to address chronic deprivation in Spitalfields. Demands were soon made for greater representation of Bangladeshi people in the project's decision-making process. Anger at political neglect was fairly intimidating and, to begin with, few Bengalis could be persuaded to brave these meetings. In the early days, I, amongst others, encouraged and ensured a Bangladeshi presence. I would like think much hard work in community development and cohesion by myself and colleagues meant the new, youthful Bangladeshi leadership took this opportunity to influence local politics, as at last the authorities were beginning to listen.

Demand increased for advice and assistance - with pensions, welfare benefits, disability information, immigration, debt, tax, education, training, National Insurance, to name a few! A sideline became mainstream in my last years at Avenues Unlimited and even today, I remain 'on call' for some of the older clients of those days.





## Ruhul Amin

### Independent Film Maker

I was born in the district town of Sylhet, Bangladesh and going to the cinema with the family was our main form of entertainment. When I was seven years old, I saw a Bengali film called 'Sutorang' and I fell in love with cinema. Much later, when I gained a bit more knowledge about cinema, I realised the sheer power of that very poetic and lyrical film which touched me so much.

Our home was two miles from the town. It was surrounded by the lush green hills of tea gardens.

Many different nationalities lived nearby, such as Santal, Uria, Manipuri, Nepali, Junagories and Biharies and the area was vibrant with cultural activities. I slept at night with the sweet melodies of flute and drum echoing across the hills, and got up early in the morning with the energetic bells of the Monipuri temples!

Every morning a sweet little Kuli girl named Lokkhi used to deliver milk at our doorstep. As a little boy, whenever I disobeyed my parents, I was threatened to be sent to the Kuli village to punish me. This created a terrible fear in me and I decided to discover those monstrous people. After achieving a high grade in an exam, I persuaded my mother to allow me to visit a Kuli tea garden with Lokkhi. I felt like I had a foot in heaven; little mud houses were surrounded by exotic flowers, in the midst of clean, calm and tranquil nature.

The simple lifestyle of the Kuli people subconsciously evoked a poetic feel in my psyche.

A visual inspiration sprung; I wanted to explore and depict the enchantment of nature and the warmth of that local tribal people, ostracised by my own community. I decided to become a film maker and capture that unparalleled beauty at the age of seven.

Just before the Liberation War of Bangladesh, my parents moved to England; a heavy blow to my dreams. My colourful visual recollection of England was from watching a few English films back home. As I was travelling from Heathrow, I could glimpse through the window a clouded sky and leafless trees, as if they were burnt down; it was a shocking discovery. Everything looked colourless and the houses were very small, but looked very antique; as if they were in an ancient land which had many stories to tell. A touch of mysticism attracted me very much. In London, to get away from boredom, I spent long hours in front of the TV and fell in love with black and white British films. I became very nostalgic about the old values of British culture reflected in those films and found some comfort from the hostile, racist environment outside.

Soon after the Liberation War, my parents decided to move back home. I was ever so determined to pursue my film making interest. London to me was the very place to fulfil my dream. Despite serious attempts by my parents to take me back, I stayed in the East End of London and made it my home. I was left with a Bengali family in Limehouse, whom my parents knew. The streets here were not safe, yet despite the constant fear of

racist attack, my hunger compelled me to go out and buy bread. I slowly gathered courage and walked around Brick Lane, befriending a few Bengali boys to share my stories with. I spent almost two years without a place at school but was eventually offered a place at Robert Montefiore School. The brutal nature of racist bullies in and out of school was difficult for me and within a few weeks I had to abandon the school. My father came to take me back home. I refused to go back; he left in anger and stopped sending money for my maintenance.

Because of this, I joined my friends and started working in the rag trade. I worked for a few years in various small sweat shops around Brick Lane, then moved on to bigger manufacturers owned by Jewish and Turkish people. My first wage was £7. What did I do with it? I bought a Super 8 Camera for five pounds in a market and started making small films!

At this time, Bengali men were often clustered together in overcrowded houses. They worked long hours, in hotel kitchens around the city and in the clothing factories. Every weekend they cooked special curries and visited each other, playing cards in smoke-filled rooms, and singing folk songs expressing their joy and frustrations. Soon after the Liberation War of Bangladesh, men brought their families over and the Bengali population increased around Tower Hamlets. We formed an organisation called Progressive Youth Organisation and organised cultural events such as drama and music. Later, activities expanded and we ran language classes and various activities for women. After the death of Altab Ali and Isak Ali, a powerful movement grew against racist attacks and drew massive media attention. As the political climate changed and the fear of the unknown gradually diminished, racist street attacks slowly vanished.

During the 1980s, I joined the Four Corners film workshop in Bethnal Green and made my first 15 minute film on a day in the life of a Bengali boy. After this, I started working for Compass Film as an Assistant Film Editor and went on to work for various Channel 4 companies. Whilst I was working, I attended evening classes at City and East London College on Jubilee Street and gained my O levels.

In 1983, I made my first documentary 'Flame in My Heart' and in 1986, I made my first feature film 'A Kind of English' both for Channel 4. The film was shown in film festivals around the world and earned critical acclaim. Later, I attended National Film and Television School. Since then I set up my own company and have produced a feature film and a few documentaries and experimental films for Channel 4 and the BBC.

Bangladeshi people inherit an ancient cultural heritage. Their folk culture encapsulates a broader philosophical horizon and propagates tolerance and harmonious living. I feel it is vital that the current Bengali generation should reflect back on their predecessors' journeys and learn how a home away from home was achieved; and equally respect the greater tolerance of the British society, which has always stood beside them in the time of extreme desperation, and respect the law of the land and value the spirit of this free society.





## Faruque Ahmed

Author

I was born in the village of Goushpur in Golapgonj, Sylhet and was educated at Raygor Primary School, M C Academy and Modan Mohan College. In my childhood, I was afraid at night because we did not have any electricity in our area so we had to use lamps. I remember my father telling me riddles and my mother singing Islamic songs: without this, I was not able to sleep. When I grew up, I made a parody of what my mother used to sing to me and she inspired me to carry on doing this.

I later developed an aspiration to become a journalist, so I became involved in different newspapers and magazines. My friends and I collaborated and brought out certain newspapers called Golap Darpon and Desh Dunya. With this experience, I was then able to write for more well-known newspapers, including Sylhet Kantha, Desh Dunia, Khedmo, and Suchayan.

By 1989, when I was working as a writer, lyricist and dramatist on Radio Bangladesh, a Tower Hamlets based cultural organisation called Jhalok sponsored me as their scriptwriter. This brought me to England and I settled in the Whitechapel area, endeavouring to carry on with my literary work. At times this was challenging because of the language barrier. I could not speak English fluently, which motivated me to read extensively and understand the language better.

My interest in the Bengali community in UK, especially in Tower Hamlets, began a few days after I arrived here, when I saw a road called 'Alie Street'. It stuck in my mind as to whether or not it was a Bengali name, as during the East India Company's time they used to write 'Ali' as 'Ally', 'Alie', and 'Alee'. To find out, I asked many senior citizens of our community but nobody knew. Finally, I went to Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives where staff told me that it might not be related to a Bengali name. It was then I realised that there was no written history, either in Bengali or in English, about the Bengali-British community in the UK, except for Caroline Adams's 'Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers'.

For that reason, to focus on our Bengali-British heritage, here and back home, and in collaboration with Anwar Shahjahan, we published a Bengali monthly magazine called London Bichitra. It was during this time that I met Tassaduq Ahmed, a Bengali intellectual in the East End, and I asked for his help as a contributor; instead he inspired me to research Bengali journals and journalism in Britain. I thought it was a good idea and successfully completed my project in 2000. This was a great success for me - within three months of it being released, my book sold out.

During the last two decades, I have collected oral histories from Bangladeshi citizens, rare documents, newspapers, photographs, booklets and posters from all over the UK; most of which I have donated to Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, including Purbodesh, Surma, Potrika, London Bichitra, Janomot and many more.



## Halema Begum

Mother

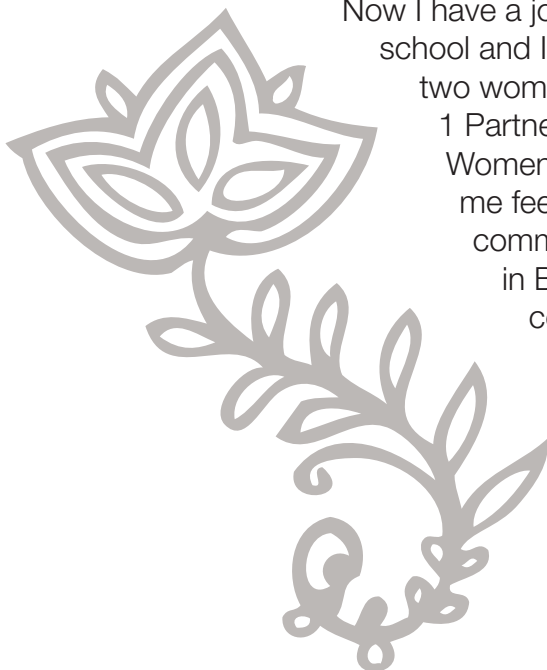
**“Joining the women’s groups made me feel very included in my community, like I was back at my home village in Bangladesh.”**

My name is Halema Begum and I am a mother of three children. I was born in a Bangladesh village and I came to Britain in August 1992. When I first came to London, I didn’t like the busy city and having

to stay at home with the door shut. This is because I was used to a quiet village area where people could always come in and out of my home; our doors were never shut.

In 1993, my first child was born which kept me busy and happy, and it was during this time that I began to get used to London and started to like the city. When my daughter started school I had more time, so I began to socialise with people outside the family. At this time I did not know English, so I only spoke with Bengali people like myself. In 1998, I began to take English lessons and now I have become really good at it. By 2004, my youngest child was born and I am really proud of all three of my children.

Now I have a job at the local school and I am a member of two women’s groups; East 1 Partnership and Toynbee Women’s group. This makes me feel very included in my local community, I felt like I was back at my home village in Bangladesh. The women’s groups have given me self confidence which is why I feel especially lucky to have met the members of both groups. I feel particularly thankful to Cynthia who is the leader of East 1 Partnership and Suria, the leader of the Toynbee Women’s group. I wish all the best to them and the members of both groups and look forward to continuing working with them in the future.





*Syed, right, with his brother and father*

## Syed Ahmed

### Entrepreneur

My name is Syed Ahmed and I am the Founder and Director of SA Vortex Ltd, a multi-award winning British design and manufacturing company.

In 1975, when I was just one year old, my parents decided to move to the UK and we settled in Tower Hamlets. I attended primary school here and later, Sir John Cass Secondary School in Stepney.

I had a brief stint in Tower Hamlets College before completing my BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance at the Hammersmith & West London College. Since leaving Higher Education, I have worked for many corporate firms in the City before setting up my own business.

From as far back as I can remember, my parents have been positive role models because of their hard work, and they set something ticking in my mind that's ticking to this day. I have never been afraid of hard work, and always tried to be the very best in whatever it was I had to do, from my days as a schoolboy right up to now. In business terms, my proudest achievement is to have carried a belief in something that most people told me was impossible, and turn it into a reality and a company, and to grow it to the stage where it is a viable business.

I have always found that you have to act not deliberate and of course, you make mistakes and of course, you learn – sometimes poorly, sometimes well. You don't always get what you deserve from your experiences and from others but what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. One important thing I've discovered is that you have to believe in yourself. Not to the point of arrogance, but you must have self-belief, because if you do then anything is possible.

What I have learned, and how I got my results was through sheer determination and hard work; I knew that if I had a hunger and a desire to reach something, there was very little that could stop me.

Through all of this, one thing has remained steady: my family. My family is something I am very proud to be a part of, and although I spend a lot of time and energy on my work, it's ultimately secondary to them. Even though I don't yet have children of my own, I am lucky enough to have a lot of joy and love to support my efforts in life and business.



## Mahmoud A Rauf

Accountant and Community Activist

**“When I found out that we were here to stay permanently, I thought we should stay here with dignity- it is no good to have an existence, when the community cannot have any role to play in the host society.”**

I was born in 1946, at a place called Kosba; it was a typical Bangladeshi village. Transport and communication were not good and boats were the main means of transport to town. Our house was full of children, mostly cousins, and we used to spend our time swimming in the river and canals, I was always happy. We also used to enjoy village story telling and opera called Jatra.

During the 1960s, I volunteered part time for a charity called Jalalabad Blind Welfare Association, at a blind treatment camp. This is a pleasant memory in my life. Then in 1968, I left my home and travelled to the UK to study accountancy in higher education. When I came to London, I stayed in the Brick Lane area. My expectation about London was different; I was surprised to see the rundown places in the East End. Racism was prevalent, Asian and black people were frequently attacked and going out alone was a problem. Whilst studying here, I was politically active and became a member of the Bangladesh Student Action Committee and Assistant Secretary of the People’s Cultural Society. When the Liberation War began in 1971, I played an active role in London to drum up support in favour of independence as I felt it was my moral duty to support my fellow country people.

At present, I hold key positions in numerous organisations and I am currently the chairman of the Bengali National Cultural Society in the UK. I have helped organise many cultural events, including the Baishakhi Mela, organised for the first time at Banglatown in East London. It became a very successful event, with a high level of community support; 25,000 people attended in the first year and at present attendance is over 100,000.

I have been a self-employed accountant in Brick Lane since 1976, setting up and running my successful accountancy firm MS Rauf & Co. When I found out that we were here to stay permanently, I thought we should stay here with dignity- it is no good to have an existence, when the community cannot have any role to play in the host society. At the same time, we have to keep our culture alive and make a contribution to that society. Having family around me means a lot to me, it is good for mental and physical health. In my opinion, wherever you are, your family should settle with you. It may be London or anywhere.

We came with our Bangladeshi culture and traditions and our generation is still following it; I regularly visit Bangladesh but my children do not feel such a close affinity. For the last 60 years, Bangladeshi people have changed for the better, especially amongst the second generation; one can notice a big change. They are more integrated, getting a good education, have a forward-looking attitude and are contributing to society in an effective way. Society is slowly becoming more inclusive but there is much still to achieve.





## Syeda Rowghi Chowdhury MBE

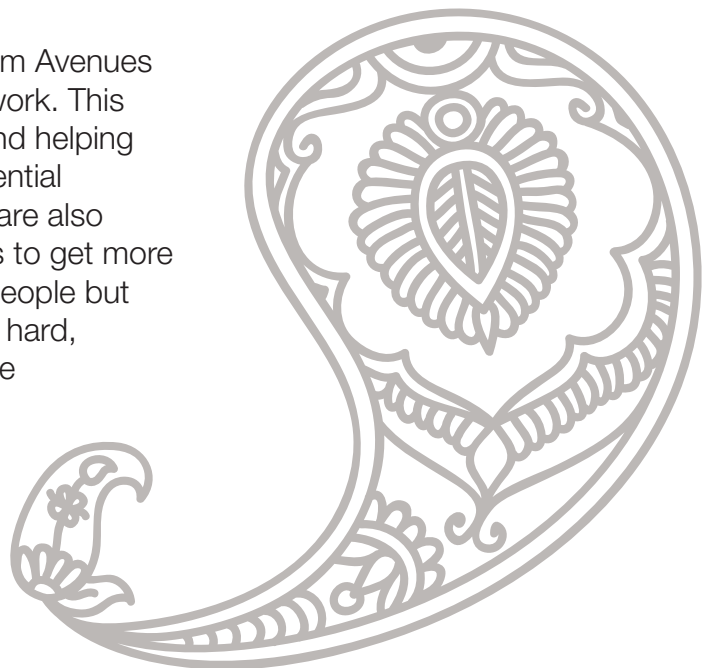
Former Community Worker

I was born in Amberkana, Sylhet but spent most of my childhood in Dhaka. I moved there when I was 12 years old to stay with my eldest sister who had recently got married. I had always been close to her, so my mum gave me permission to go and stay there and study. In Dhaka, I completed my secondary education and passed exams that were equivalent to GCSEs and later did one year of my A Levels in Sociology, History and Chemistry.

I got married in 1983, and in the same year came to the UK whilst my husband remained in Dhaka; he was working as an engineer and could not come with me until 1989. I already had family in the UK; my father had moved here in the 1950s and my mother, two of my sisters and brother came to join him, whilst I and my eldest sister had remained in Bangladesh.

When I joined my family, they were still living in Tooting. By then, my father had set up a take-away business and we stayed in a flat above it. In less than a year, we decided to move to Tower Hamlets because my mother's cousin Tassaduq Ahmed told us that there were more opportunities for Bangladeshi people in Tower Hamlets. I was amazed at how many Bangladeshis lived there! It was also the same cousin that got me involved in community work. I remember one day, he called my mother and said that I could come and work at the Montefiore Centre, where he was working. The idea was to start a voluntary group, helping local people. I started doing outreach activities, to build a group, in which I would teach Bangla, as many children didn't know their mother language. I enjoyed the work I was doing, collecting children and escorting them to the centre. Sometimes, it was difficult getting children out of the house, as times were hard and people had a negative attitude. However, I liked teaching Bangla because it was my own language.

In 1986, two youth workers, Georgie and Clare from Avenues Unlimited, approached me to do some voluntary work. This involved working with local Bangladeshi women and helping with outreach activities such as day outings, residential camping, sewing and much more. Georgie and Clare also wanted me to accompany them to Bengali houses to get more women involved. They knew the houses and the people but could not speak Bangla. I remember this was very hard, as women generally stayed indoors; their lives were sheltered: they cooked, cleaned and only went outside to take and bring their children to school. It took a lot of convincing and I often had to speak to the women's mother-in-law, father in-law and husbands. We used to make two or three visits to these houses. When they





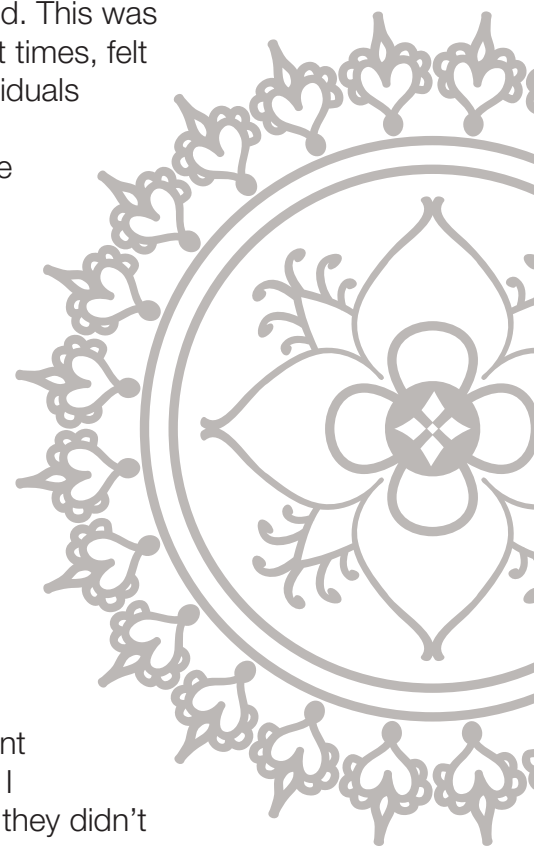
were happy and satisfied, that's when I used to collect them. I remember being surprised at how hospitable some of the people were; they would offer me food, dinner or what ever they had.

I found it very difficult when I started working at Avenues Unlimited. This was because I could not speak any English. I understood a little but at times, felt frustrated when I could not respond. There were one or two individuals that were Bengalis at Avenues Unlimited. So when I used to get really stuck, they would help and explain things. Sometimes these individuals would write notes for me to take home so I could show it to my younger brother or sister and they would explain it to me. My brother and sister were fluent in English because when they came to this country they were very young, 5 and 6 years old, whereas I was 23. I eventually learnt to speak English as the majority of my colleagues were non-Bengali. I used to hear them constantly talking in English and knew I had to pick it up quickly. I tried to learn words and slowly built up my vocabulary until I was confident enough to construct sentences. The people I worked with were so helpful and patient. I could not believe how kind they were. I was able to build good relationships and communicate with them.

I also worked in other places such as Oxford House, Jagonari Centre and Osmani Youth Centre. I was very keen on development work so would often encourage women to attend ESOL classes. I strongly believed that women needed to learn English because if they didn't know basic English, how would they communicate with their children's teachers or call the ambulance if they had an accident? I used to get ideas from ESOL classes and devised a programme of my own for new Bangladeshi women that had recently arrived in the UK. I was not a teacher but I wanted these women to feel comfortable and confident before attending a proper ESOL class.

In 2009, I received a letter from the Queen saying that I had been nominated for an MBE. I never expected it and was extremely surprised. I went to Buckingham Palace and was knighted by the Queen. I remember her saying that a lot of people recommended me. This is my achievement for the work I have done. My family, especially my daughters, are very proud of me. When I first came to this country, I earned less than fifty pence an hour and couldn't speak English properly, so to receive an MBE for helping people was amazing. I have always tried to do my best for the community and all the work has been for them; it felt good to be recognised.

Although I didn't live in Tower Hamlets for long, I feel my whole life is in this borough. I moved to different places and would get offered jobs elsewhere but I've always wanted to remain working here. It's where I feel most at home.





## Lutfun Hussain

Healthy Living Coordinator  
Coriander Club, Spitalfields City Farm

**“Seeing the happy face of a child who has grown even a single marigold is something that money can’t buy.”**

I grew up in Bangladesh, my father grew fields of rice on our farm and I was always surrounded by the culture of growing vegetables. Then in 1969, we came to East London to an alien climate where no-one grew traditional Bengali vegetables. Fortunately, there was a large garden at our house and I made my own experiments, unfortunately, the first year my vegetables were killed by frost. The next year I had some success, though the following year all my vegetables died again. However, I persevered and over many years I discovered which vegetables suited the climate and when you could plant them. I tried and tried because I love gardening, when you are successful and even when you are not, you learn something.

Responding to an advertisement in the Bangla newspaper was the start of my involvement at Spitalfields City Farm. I first came to Spitalfields City Farm as a volunteer, applying the knowledge I had acquired through my own experiments. At that time, there were not many people planting Bengali vegetables, but slowly, slowly, people came to see the garden and then the community started to join in and the Coriander Club began. The Club provides local Bangladeshi women with a space in which to exercise, socialise and grow traditional Bengali vegetables, and what they learn and grow, they bring home to their dinner tables. The club is currently funded by the Local Food Fund from the National Lottery.

The Coriander Club began to have a number of additional benefits. The cooking class and gardening were important in helping members feel less isolated, many of the women were homesick and scared but felt safe in the club, speaking Bangla, socialising and laughing together. The Coriander Club is a small project but working with such a diverse group of people and seeing the positive benefits that working on the farm brings them, is incredibly rewarding.

As a result of my work here, I have been appointed as one of London’s Local Food Leaders by Mayor Boris Johnson, reflecting my work to promote ethnic diversity, cultural exchange, inclusion, organic horticulture and healthy living in our society. Working with more partners and sharing knowledge I will work to demonstrate and encourage inner city sustainable living.

The women of the Coriander Club are also members of the Women’s Environment Network and their expertise has even been called on by Kew Gardens to advise about the cultural significance of several South Asian plants through their Plant Cultures Project.

# The Coriander Club

## Spitalfields City Farm

Spitalfields City Farm was established in 1978 by local people, as a place to grow food when they lost their allotment site to developers. The farm has grown to become a registered charity with 8 part time members of staff and 350 volunteers. It is run by a voluntary Management Committee and would not exist without generous volunteer help, grants and financial donations. We are always looking for people to get involved and support the valuable community work we do.

Growing food is an integral part of Bengali life and in particular Bengali women's lives. Lutfun Hussain joined the farm as a volunteer over 12 years ago and set up the Coriander Club in 2000; she is now employed part-time as the Healthy Living Co-ordinator. The Club is part of a grassroots project at the farm called Grow With Us, which encourages local people to grow food. It is currently funded through the National Lottery's Local Food Fund.

The Club's initial impetus was to grow fresh produce that Bangladeshi women were finding hard to source in the local markets at a reasonable price. Lutfun was also worried about the amount of ghee and fried food in her community's diet and wanted an opportunity to help educate, inform and enthuse women how to cook simply and healthily and to preserve the strong traditions of the past.

The Club involves approximately 30 members of the Bangladeshi community - often older, non-English speaking women who can find themselves isolated after raising their families. The members grow traditional Asian foods including: kodu,

chilli, pumpkin, mooli and, of course, coriander. Members share the produce they grow; using it in cookery classes at the Brady Centre and for special events at the farm. In 2007, Lutfun was recognised as a London Leader by the London Sustainable Development Commission for her contribution to sustainability through the Coriander Club and continues her valuable work for the local community at the farm.

If you would like to get involved please call the farm on 0207 257 8762 or email: [gardens@spitalfieldscityfarm.org](mailto:gardens@spitalfieldscityfarm.org). Alternatively, just pop in to one of our gardening sessions at the farm every Tuesday or Wednesday 11am – 2pm or sign up for our Pick and Cook sessions.

Olivia Burt  
Grow With Us Co-ordinator



*Growing Kodu at Spitalfields City Farm*

**Spitalfields City**  
**FARM**





## Rajonuddin Jalal

Community Activist  
and co-founder of Kobi Nazrul Centre

I was born in the village of Chando Gram in Bangladesh. In 1972, immediately after the War of Liberation, I came to the UK with my parents; I was 12 years old and had witnessed much violence in my home country.

I spent my first night in Brick Lane, Banglatown, before going to live with my parents and uncle in Birmingham. The first night that I arrived in London, I was dazzled by the beautiful lights. The developed city was beautiful, compared to what I had seen in

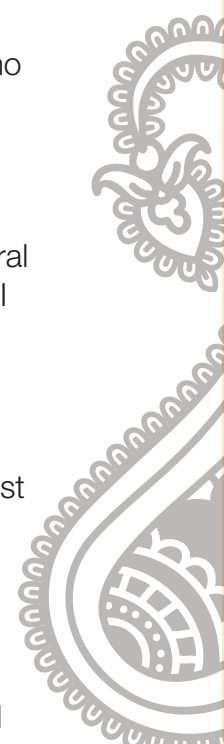
Sylhet, in Dhaka. However, Tower Hamlets during the daytime seemed quite gloomy, dull and depressing. I lived in Birmingham for a year and attended a language course there before moving back to Tower Hamlets. I lived with my relatives because my parents had to return to Bangladesh; our family was divided between Bangladesh and the UK due to strict immigration rules, disallowing those over 18 to get entry clearance with their families to settle in the UK.

I was offered a place at the Bow Boys Secondary School. There were only two of us who spoke Bengali. We felt isolated, were often subjected to racial harassment and faced language barriers. I left school at the age of 16, without any qualifications and I had to support myself by working in the fashion industry. I worked as an Embroidery Machinist, Leather Machinist and Clothing Machinist. Later, I went to college as a mature student, successfully completing my O and A levels before continuing to the Polytechnic of Central London, to study for a law degree. I decided however, to withdraw from this course, as I wanted to fully commit all my efforts to the anti-racist movement in London, in a role as Youth Leader, which became my real passion.

The 'Battle for Brick Lane' in 1978, is a memorable historic event in my personal life. These events led to a greater alliance between different communities and other anti-racist organisations, and on the 17th of July 1978, the Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee organised a day long strike, which brought Tower Hamlets to a standstill. I believe this is the most notable anti-racist event for the last 40 years.

I later returned to the London Guildhall University to do a degree in Sociology, Economics and Politics. The main barriers at the time were racism and the lack of equal opportunities, but this did not stop me from also achieving a post-graduate diploma in Management Studies.

I have worked for many organisations including St Mary's Housing and Welfare Resource centre, ILEA and Tower Hamlets NHS Trust. Alongside this, I was a voluntary community activist and was instrumental in setting up the Bangladesh Youth Movement and the Federation of Bangladeshi Youth organisations. I also helped to establish the Bangladesh Centre at Notting Hill Gate. In Tower Hamlets, I helped to establish the Berner Centre, the Kobi Nazrul Centre, Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality, the Davenant Centre, Jagonari Centre, and the Weavers Centre in Club Row.



# Kobi Nazrul Centre

At a time when there was no specific centre that existed to cater for Bengalis, there was still a strong desire to express common social, cultural and artistic interests. This prompted different individuals and organisations to come together within the Spitalfields Bengali Action Group in 1974, to launch a campaign to create a community centre that reflected British life with Bengali culture. Eight years later, after intense lobbying, countless meetings, and debates and building works, the Kobi Nazrul Centre was formally opened by Lord Fenner Brockway in October 1982.

The establishment of the centre signalled the acceptance of the Bengali community's presence in Tower Hamlets and helped to form the community's own identity.

The centre is named after Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899 – 1976) who was the national poet of Bangladesh. Most of his work was dedicated to the themes of sectarianism, oppression, slavery, colonialism, social justice and women's rights. Kazi Nazrul Islam's struggle mirrored the Bengali community experiences of racial harassment, discrimination and violence and inspired them to overcome the many problems they faced in establishing the centre.

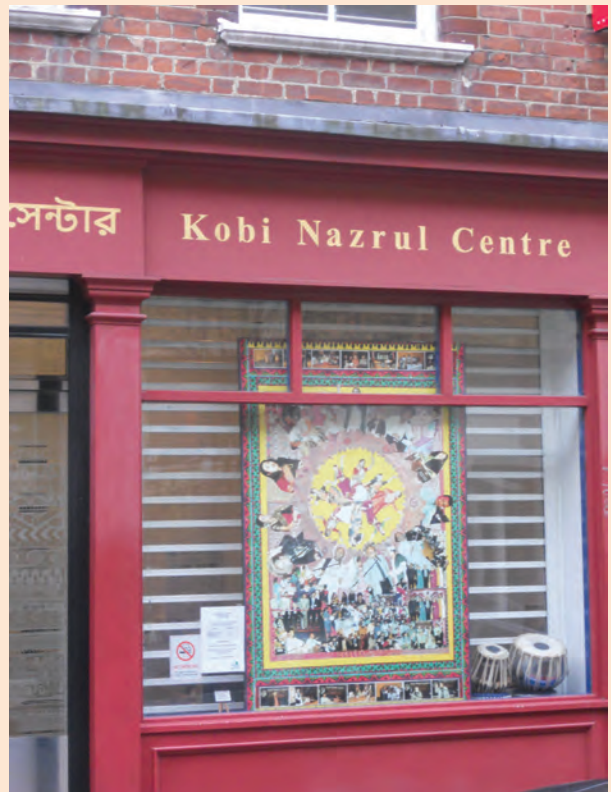
Kobi Nazrul Centre was refurbished and re-opened in February 2000, as Tower Hamlets Council's flagship Bengali arts and cultural centre. Artist Chilla Burman was commissioned to embody the different aspects of Kazi Nazrul Islam's life in the design of the centre. The building has spaces available for hire for events, exhibitions, seminars, concerts and performances.

Kobi Nazrul Centre  
30 Hanbury Street  
London  
E1 6QR

tel: 020 7364 7900

For more information, please contact:

Jerry Deeks  
Centre Manager  
Brady Arts and Community Centre  
192-196 Hanbury Street  
London  
E1 5HU  
tel: 020 7364 7928  
email: [jerry.deeks@towerhamlets.gov.uk](mailto:jerry.deeks@towerhamlets.gov.uk)





## Syed Abdul Kadir 'Captain' Retired Pakistan Naval Officer

I was born in a village called Khadam Rasul on the night of Lailatul Kader. According to Muslim faith, this is a powerful night. I was schooled locally and saw education as being very important to my life. School was full of fun in every aspect. I enjoyed the extra-curricular activities such as bird hunting, fishing, sailing, horse and elephant riding.

One day, when I was only 16 years old, I visited Sylhet town and saw a big signboard which read, 'Join the Navy: See the world'. This short statement was to change my life forever, as it motivated me to join the Pakistan Navy. The impact it had on me was so strong that I began to dream of leading a successful life through this. I went to Sylhet along with my father. He inspired me to join the naval service, so I passed an assessment and medical test and on 23 August 1950, I joined the Pakistan Navy.

I did my training in HMPS Bahadur. The training period was quite difficult and challenging and we were under very strict rules and discipline. I remember waking up 4am to start PT and run cross-country on the Arabian seashore. Training 1200 miles away from home was quite depressing for us, as the only way we could contact home was via post. Sometimes we used to feel homesick and some of us used to cry in the toilet.

As part of my training, I completed the Artificer Course, which was the equivalent to the Diploma of Associate Engineer. This enabled me to take on the role of an Engine Room Artificer 4th Class. As an engineer, my main responsibility was to operate machinery, auxiliaries and the main engines and keep them in operating condition.

The Pakistan Navy became like home to me, as I served for 23 years until 30 November 1972. During my service, I have been fortunate to be part of various high profile events. In 1953, I came to London and was amongst the lucky 120 guard members of the PNS Zulfikar who participated in the guard of honour for the Coronation ceremony of HM Queen Elizabeth II in Westminster Abbey. I remember this day in June. Millions of people had come to watch, or get a glimpse of the Queen, as she made her way in a golden state coach. When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned the noise was tremendous. There were shouts of 'God Save the Queen' and gun salutes were fired. I saw troops and officers from all over the Commonwealth countries. We marched to Buckingham Palace and the Queen, accompanied with her family, came out into the balcony. Looking back, I feel very lucky and fortunate to have been part of this. Even after all these years, I still have my Coronation ceremony medal, which all guard members received that day. Since my first visit, I developed a fondness for the British culture, its people and the Royal Family. I always went to see members of the Royal Family when they visited Bangladesh.

I owe the Pakistan Navy for much of my experiences in life. During my naval service, I was lucky enough to visit a number of places including the Middle East, Far East, Europe, Australia, Africa and the USA. We visited these places on exercises, to repair our naval ships (as Pakistan did not have dockyards), to purchase war ships and finally on goodwill missions.

During my career, I was also a member of the Pakistan anti-smuggling organisation and actively participated during wartime, receiving the following medals: Republic Medal 1956, Tamgha-i-Jang 1965, Clasp-Kutch 1965 & Tamgha-i-Khidmat class 1.

In 1971, when the liberation war started, I decided to leave Pakistan Navy and move to Bangladesh because I didn't want to fight against my homeland. Upon returning, I decided to join the freedom fighters. Then, in 1974, I joined the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) as a marine engineer.

I got married in December 1965, and have three sons and three daughters. Three of my children were born in Pakistan whilst I was serving in the navy, and the other three were born in Bangladesh. My oldest daughter got married in 1987, and came to the UK in 1990, since then she settled in Tower Hamlets. My older son got married in 1997, and came to UK in 2000. He has also settled in the same area. I decided that it was time for me to move to England, so I could be closer to them. I came here in 2003 and 2006, to visit and applied for permanent stay permission. Coming here was not a new thing for me, as I had visited this country on a number of occasions but this was the first time I saw Tower Hamlets.

During my navy service, I had the opportunity to visit many countries and see people's lifestyles. When I came to Tower Hamlets, I was surprised to see the level of support people receive compared to other countries. Tower Hamlets is one of the poorest areas, where people receive more support than any other borough. Things are changing now but we still have Surma Elders' Club, a place where people can go and socialise. When I went to Surma Club for the first time I met Mr Azad, who explained to me the services and facilities available for us. Whilst I was there, a few other elderly people arrived to discuss various problems. Now my life revolves around my grandchildren and I spend time socialising at the club and reading newspapers. I have been coming to Surma Elders' Club in Toynbee Hall since 2004. The club provides me day to day help and advice. It is also a great place, where I have the opportunity to socialise and just see people, which is very hard to come by at my age. I have known some of the other men for years and this creates a very lovely atmosphere. When someone sees me, they call me 'Captain'. I can banter and joke with them as much as I like. We are like a family here.



# Surma Older People's Club

Among the most socially and financially excluded of the vibrant Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets are the pensioners who first set foot on British soil in the 1950s and 60s and who worked over decades to build thriving British industries.

Surma Older People's Club has been operating since 1983, and is one of the longest running Bangladeshi pensioners' clubs in the UK.

Surma offers a drop-in service to the local elderly Bangladeshi community; it enables older Bangladeshi people to access a number of services under one roof, which includes help with the translation of documents, advice on debts and/or benefits, general information and practical support.

Based at the Toynbee Hall Wellbeing Centre, Surma Older People's Club is one of many Older People Services facilitated by Toynbee Hall. It aims at reducing social isolation amongst the community by providing an environment in which individuals can reminisce with other members and participate in leisure and cultural activities.

Opening Hours:

Monday – Tuesday: 9am-5pm

Friday: 9am-12.30pm

No appointment necessary.

For more information about Surma Older People's Club, drop in to Toynbee Hall reception to find out more or contact:

Abul Azad

Project Co-ordinator

Surma Elders' Club

Toynbee Hall

28 Commercial Street

London, E1 6LS

tel: 020 7392 2951

email: [abul.azad@toynbeehall.org.uk](mailto:abul.azad@toynbeehall.org.uk)



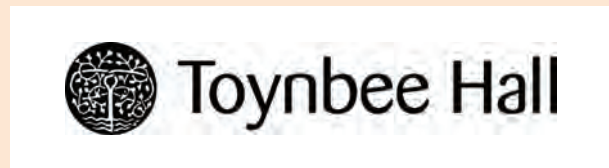


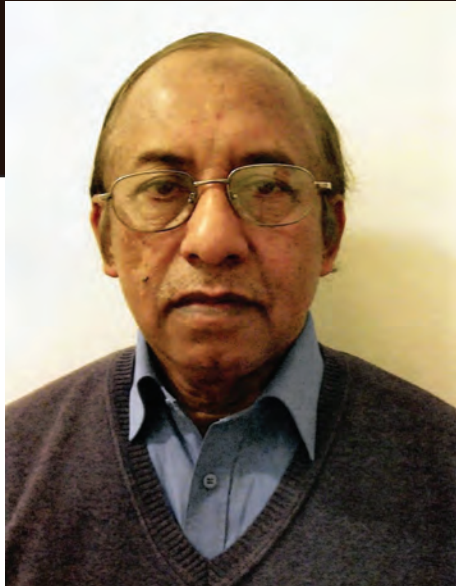
# Toynbee Hall

Toynbee Hall was founded in 1884, by Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta, as a centre for education and social reform. Over a century later, Toynbee Hall continues to work to alleviate the effects of poverty and to support people to realise their potential.

Toynbee Hall aims to be the place where people come for excellent local services and where they can share ideas and experience, gather information and knowledge that we use together to take action to change lives and eradicate poverty in Britain. Its main objective is to meet local needs and that is reflected in the variety of services Toynbee Hall offers. The centre works with over 5,000 people from the local community each year, supporting them to meet the challenges that they face and to encourage them to take control of their lives.

Toynbee Hall,  
28 Commercial Street,  
London E1 6LS  
tel: 020 7247 6943  
email: [info@toynbeehall.org.uk](mailto:info@toynbeehall.org.uk)  
[www.toynbeehall.org.uk](http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk)





## Mohammed Osman Gani

Co-Founder of  
Spitalfields Housing Association

I was born in former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, in 1949, and grew up in a rural farming village situated in Osman Nagar. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, whilst I was studying, Bangladesh was turbulent as the Liberation War was underway. The calls for freedom against oppression by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971, inspired me to become an active participant. For nine months, I remember joining my compatriots to oppose the occupation forces.

When the war ended, I was determined to complete my education and in 1973, passed my MA in Economics. The newly independent Bangladesh needed the services of young people, so I took employment in the Bangladesh Civil Service as a Customs Officer at Osmani International Airport. It was a great opportunity to welcome home expatriate Bangladesh nationals and provide services to them. In 1976, I decided to leave for the UK and settled in Spitalfields. Based at Toynbee Hall Universities Settlement and Spitalfields Housing & Planning Rights Service, I witnessed and experienced racial discrimination in every aspect of our lives from housing, to education and employment. Gradually, I developed an insight into these priorities and helped to train locals, which I thought was the only way for them to get involved and tackle these issues.

By 1979, I became very engaged in community work, development and local planning issues. The community was facing threats to their homes from city developers. Racial discrimination in housing allocations, homelessness and lack of support from statutory authorities were common, forcing us to seek alternatives. Using my experience, as a Development Officer for Solon Housing Co-operative, I helped to set up and manage Spitalfields Housing Co-operative, now known as Spitalfields Housing Association Ltd (SHA) and other successful housing projects. Solon and Spitalfields Housing Co-operative took the initiative to deal with mixed properties, and the late Ahmed Fakhruddin and I helped set up Spitalfields Small Business Association, involving local employers who worked and lived on top of their workshops. By the late 1980s, we had at least five Bangladeshi community-based housing co-operatives in Tower Hamlets. We were now able to motivate and effectively involve the Bengali community, helping them to gain experience in housing development, inner city development, management of properties employment and regeneration.

Looking back, I would say that the experiences and direct involvement of Bangladeshis in the earlier years were crucial in bringing changes to the borough. Today, I see Tower Hamlets as being the capital of Britain's Bangladeshi community. The landmark development and naming of the historical Spitalfields ward as 'Spitalfields and Banglatown' bears testimony to this. It was with Bangladeshi community-led organisations that we were able to build and name housing estates with Bengali names such as Fakhruddin Estate, Zafar Khan House, Burhan Uddin House, Shah Jalal Estate, Megna Court, Surma Close, Plassey Building, Aftab Terrace, and the Language Martyr's monument at Altab Ali Park, all of which recognise the changing nature of Tower Hamlets.

# Spitalfields Housing Association

Spitalfields Housing Association was founded in 1979, by members of the Bengali community in response to the poor housing conditions in the Spitalfields area. It is the largest and oldest Bangladeshi-led housing association in the UK.

Set up initially as a co-operative, the Association concentrated on developing large family sized accommodation for Bangladeshi families. The Association registered with the Housing Corporation in 1980, and began an ambitious development programme, refurbishing what had previously been slum areas. By 1982, the Association had acquired and modernised six houses in the Brick Lane area. Alongside Spelman and Princelet Street, the Association acquired and redeveloped Burhan Uddin House and Selby Street in 1987.

The Spitalfields Housing Association continued to grow and by 2000, it owned and managed over 400 homes. This has since increased to over 600 properties, the majority of which are within a two mile radius of the office. Recently, the Association has started to provide shared ownership accommodation, in addition to short-term accommodation for homeless families, through a scheme with a local authority partner.

Contact details:

Spitalfields Housing Association Ltd  
78 Quaker Street  
Tower Hamlets  
London E1 6SW

tel: 0207 392 5400

email: [admin@spitalfieldsha.co.uk](mailto:admin@spitalfieldsha.co.uk)






Julie Begum, far right

## Nurjahan Julie Begum

Chair and Co-Founder  
of the Swadhinata Trust

My parents migrated to London in the 1960s, and I was born and brought up on a housing estate in Tower Hamlets. Growing up in east London in the 1970s and 1980s, I was aware of a lot of racism from children and adults; I remember an occasion when my father stood up to a racist family on our council estate and was then arrested for it by the police. However, we had friendly, caring white and black neighbours and during Prince Charles and Lady Diana's engagement we celebrated with a street party on the estate.

I am extremely grateful for all the opportunities I have had for education and work, as this has allowed me to lead a financially independent and active life from a young age. I met many inspirational teachers at primary and secondary schools; meeting Caroline Adams during a school project inspired me to do youth work. My family has been very supportive. I was the first in my family to go onto higher education and continue on to complete a master's course. I remain very close to them and see my mum nearly every day.



After continuing in further and higher education, I was fortunate to find work in the community, education and heritage sector. Added with the experience of doing voluntary work, I have had a varied and interesting career. I have worked as a teacher at Tower Hamlets College, been overseas to volunteer with VSO, and have worked with refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable people, learning about their lives. During my training, I have learnt how to challenge sexism, homophobia and racism and I have volunteered in local community organisations; organising a women's response to racism and fascism during the 1990s with Women Unite Against Racism. I have also worked with museums; I have been a project worker for the V&A Museum of Childhood and a project co-ordinator at the Geffrye Museum, specialising in developing diverse audiences. I have been committed to working in the local community since the mid 1980s and can't imagine not being involved in some group or organisation.

I helped set up the Swadhinata Trust in 2000. Since being involved here, I have realised how pioneering and courageous Bengali women have been historically and I want to be able to promote this to a wider audience.

The Tower Hamlets Bengali community has had a unique and influential impact on the development of the Bengali community both locally and across Britain. Bengalis have become much more aware of their political rights, especially when faced with the violent racism of the late 1970s. This community activism has led to a greater participation in local politics.

The biggest challenge for the future is how to ensure all Bengalis know about their rich and varied heritage both in the UK and abroad, so they can live their lives proud of who they are and not be defeated by poverty, ignorance and racism.

# Swadhinata Trust

Swadhinata Trust is a secular Bengali organisation set up in 2000, by a group of community workers to raise youth awareness about Bengali history, culture and heritage. The Trust has established resources for the British Bengali community and the general public in the field of education, research and the creative arts.



Some of the activities of the Trust involve running seminars, workshops, film screenings and exhibitions. The Trust also produces educational literature (teachers' packs, magazines and books) and organises cultural events.

Alongside this, Swadhinata Trust carries out oral history projects and research to document British Bengali community history, culture and diversity, with the objective of enhancing the lives of British Bengalis living and working in Tower Hamlets, in other London boroughs and across the UK; supporting the promotion of community cohesion.

In 2011-12 Swadhinata Trust partnered with Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives to support and mentor a full-time heritage skills trainee, Shahera Begum. The year-long placement focussed on collecting and promoting the borough's Bengali heritage, and formed part of a nationwide traineeship scheme led by The National Archives and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.



*Nurjahan Julie Begum marching against racism*

Swadhinata Trust,  
International Centre for Community  
Development (Office: CSG05),  
London Metropolitan University,  
Old Castle Street, London E1 7NT.

[www.swadhinata.org.uk](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk)  
email: [admin@swadhinata.org.uk](mailto:admin@swadhinata.org.uk)



## Kay Jordan MBE (1947 – 2010)

Co-Founder of Spitalfields Small Business Association and HEBA Women's Project



Made by Heba women in memory of Kay Jordan

Kay Jordan MBE was born in Cleckheaton, Yorkshire, and went on to become the first female architect from the area. In the 1960s, aged 18, Kay moved to London to study at the Architects Association. Her early interest was in industrial workspaces and housing but gradually, she became committed to 'community architecture', believing that the spaces we inhabit affect our quality of life and that everyone is entitled to a pleasant environment in which they feel safe. In the late 1970s, the relationship between good architectural design and quality of life, even for the most disadvantaged, became Kay's philosophy.

Kay's initial career began at a housing co-operative and then in 1983, she established the Spitalfields Small Business Association (SSBA), which she dedicated most of her life to. The SSBA took on and rehabilitated numerous buildings in Spitalfields, creating and securing affordable residential and workspace accommodations for the Bengali community. Kay even mortgaged her own flat for new building developments when there were no other means of financing projects. This went on during challenging times in Spitalfields, when Fascist marching occurred every Sunday on Brick Lane. Then, it was almost impossible for a Bangladeshi woman to go out on the street and Kay recognised a need for a safe and comfortable space where women could meet, share skills and feel welcome. From this need, Heba was created in 1990. At first there was just an informal gathering of friends in Princelet Street but activity grew, due largely to the drive and creativity of local Bangladeshi women.

In 1996, Kay was appointed a MBE and in the same year, Heba, alongside sister project Poetry in Wood (a carpentry project for people with learning disabilities) was constituted as the SSBA Community Trust. Kay served as the director of the Trust, overseeing work at Heba and Poetry in Wood, while continuing her more than full-time job as director of the SSBA.

Kay managed numerous other achievements in this time, one being her victory over Crossrail's plans to dig under Spitalfields and Banglatown ward and place a huge ventilation shaft on Hanbury Street. Kay personally presented the case against Crossrail's plans to the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The plans were changed and the route diverted. She carried out a huge volume of work and lived to a ripe old age. Sadly, she died on 28th December 2010. However, right up to the end, her concern was only for her work and the individual people she sought to help.

Kay once said "It's not enough to do something valuable with your life; you must be sure it will still be there when you're gone," and this sums up how she saw herself: merely as a tool for making other people's lives better. Kay was so creative and got so much joy from it, that she has inspired a whole team of people to carry on her work, and we are already inspiring others. In this respect, she is still here.

# Heba Women's Project

Heba Women's Project is a unique training and enterprise project providing women from diverse cultural backgrounds with a safe and welcoming place in which to make new friends, learn new skills and engage in enterprise activities to suit their particular needs and family commitments.

Our training programmes include courses in: Spoken and Written English, Sewing and Garment Production, and IT Training. Courses are taught to a variety of levels and all lead to nationally recognised qualifications.

We also run an enterprise programme which offers production work for women, through links with new designers, and a small number of subsidised work spaces for women who want to try out new ideas and start up in business.

Heba was the winner of the 'Social Inclusion & Diversity' section of Tower Hamlets 2010 Third Sector Awards.

We also run a creche providing quality childcare including free spaces to trainees and a flexible, affordable service to other local people.

For more details please contact us or visit our website.

Heba Women's Project  
164 Brick Lane  
London E1 6RU  
tel: 020 7377 0400 or 020 7377 0261  
email: heba@ssba.info





## Zenith Rahman

Community worker and local councillor

I was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh. This town is situated in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh, near the border of the Assam province of India. I moved to the UK to join my parents just before the completion of my secondary school education. We lived in Stoke Newington and I attended language classes at Hackney College. I progressed onto a NNBE nursery course, which led me to work at the Montefiore Playgroup, a nursery situated in the East End of London. During this period, I got married and moved in with my husband, who was living in Bow, Tower Hamlets. I continued my work with the Montefiore Centre and was amongst the very few Bengali women who were working through this period. It was not easy for Bengali women to go out or work. It was a highly challenging to get involved with any community, voluntary or paid work. I did not let this stop me; I got involved with voluntary and campaign work against racism, better housing and better education.

I always received support from my father, husband and other family members. My work was extremely important for me and the community that I served; my local community was in need of engagement and development.

In the early 1980s, Andrew Mawson came to Bromley-by-Bow as a young vicar at the local church. Only a few elderly members of the community attended the Sunday prayers and as a result, the church building was empty during the rest of the week. Andrew was keen to get more of the community involved but it was not an easy task to engage locals in activities outside of the church. As I lived locally, I met Andrew through my husband, whilst they were organising youth activities for the most disadvantaged young people of the borough. Many youth clubs and community centres could not, or did not, give access due to racism. Kingsley Hall, which was located next door to the church, had been recently refurbished with a GLC grant and held a very successful youth club once a week. The Bromley by Bow Centre did not exist during this time but Andrew felt that it would be an ideal place to engage more community development schemes. This was an extremely challenging task.

Andrew set up a team, which included three members: Alison Trimble, Donald Finley and myself; we organised funds and projects at the church. I initially started as an outreach worker, communicating on a one-to-one level with local community members, in particular minority groups, knocking on doors and encouraging them to attend activities at the newly formed centre. Under my initiative, more than thirty projects were established and the centre eventually developed into an extensive, and probably the largest, voluntary sector organisation in London, with more than 150 paid workers along with 200 volunteers working at the same time.

This was probably the first healthy living centre of its kind in the East End of London where public, private and voluntary sectors merged together, and I am very proud to have been a part of its creation.



# Bromley by Bow Centre

The Bromley by Bow Centre is an innovative community organisation in East London, working in one of the most deprived wards in the UK. Each week we support families, young people and adults of all ages to learn new skills, improve their health and wellbeing, find employment and develop the confidence to achieve their goals and transform their lives. At the core of the Centre's thinking is our belief in people and their capacity to achieve amazing things.

Today, the Bromley by Bow Centre is an organisation with a turnover of more than £3m a year and in excess of 100 staff. It is the third largest provider of adult education in the Borough of Tower Hamlets and has launched numerous spin-off businesses. Well-known in London, the Centre has developed a growing national and international reputation, and today shares its expertise with people who want to improve their own communities.

If you haven't been to the Centre before, please do come and visit us. Our café is open from morning until lunch every weekday.

We also organise regular tours of the Centre, please contact us for more information.

Bromley by Bow Centre  
St Leonards Street  
London  
E3 3BT

tel: 020 8709 9700  
fax: 020 8880 6608  
email: [connect@bbbc.org.uk](mailto:connect@bbbc.org.uk)  
[www.bbbc.org.uk](http://www.bbbc.org.uk)



*The Bromley by Bow Centre*






## Fanu Miah

### Bangladesh Youth Movement Chief Officer

I was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh and grew up in a rural, quiet village. When I came to Tower Hamlets, I wanted to help and support the deprived people in the community; to improve education, training, health and welfare.

I started with the Bangladesh Youth Movement as a volunteer in the late 1970s. I was a very active member of the community and fought against racism and fascism on the streets and institutionally, protecting and defending the rights of local Bangladeshis.

Along with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, I was associated with a number of other local and international organisations that span from local welfare and education trusts to the international anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa and the fight for the liberation of Bangladesh. However, my passion in local community work led me to become a management committee member of the Bangladesh Youth Movement in the early 1980s and I steered the organisation into delivering mainstream services and increasing community development work, along with volunteering opportunities.



During this period, I also worked with a number of other organisations, delivering best practice and organisational development. In 1985, I rejoined the Bangladesh Youth Movement team in the role of Senior Advisor due to the lack of Bangladeshis having the ability to provide welfare support, advice, and advocacy and information services. Since then, the Bangladesh Youth Movement has gone from strength to strength, expanding the number of services provided and setting up a number of Service Level Agreements with Tower Hamlets Council. Since then, I have moved up the organisational structure and currently hold the post of Chief Officer.

Outside of the Bangladesh Youth Movement, I was elected as a councillor of Whitechapel Ward (London Borough of Tower Hamlets) from 2002 – 2006, where I held a number of portfolios within Tower Hamlets Council, including Chair of Scrutiny and Overview Committee and Cabinet Lead Member.

My hopes for the future of the Bangladesh Youth Movement is to continue to help people through delivering services to the local community.

# Bangladesh Youth Movement

Bangladesh Youth Movement is the first self help Bangladeshi group in Tower Hamlets. The movement comes from humble roots and was formed in the late 1960s, against the backdrop of overt racism and violent attacks from the National Front. At that time, it was an organisation offering cultural activities including drama, camping, youth provision and sporting activities. In 1976, as the demand for local services grew, it was formally constituted to provide and meet the demands of the local Bangladeshi community in the East End. These activities included primary youth, community work and cultural and educational exchanges. Bangladesh Youth Movement now offers the following services:

## Women's Centre

The Women's Centre of Excellence provides facilities for all women who may face social, cultural, educational and economic expulsion by providing sympathetic grounds for counselling, self development programmes and certificated training on health and education, and assistance with volunteering and employment opportunities.

The Study Support Project, which is run in partnership with Stepney School, is an established supplementary provision that helps young people with core subjects of the National Curriculum. There are also a wide range of activities for women and girls.

For more information, please contact us:  
tel: 020 7377 8668  
email: [womenscentre@bym.org.uk](mailto:womenscentre@bym.org.uk)

## Advice Centre

Open five days a week, this bi-lingual advice centre aims to empower the local community by helping people to gain access to statutory and non statutory rights information, offering a range of services from general help to casework advice on welfare benefits, housing and homelessness, nationality and immigration, debt, education and employment, domestic violence and health. These services are provided as a 'drop in' session or by appointment. For more information or to book an appointment, contact us at:

21-23 Henriques Street  
London E1 1NB  
tel: 020 7488 1831  
email: [f.miah@bym.org.uk](mailto:f.miah@bym.org.uk)

## Youth Centre

In partnership with Tower Hamlets Council Children's Services, the centre delivers provision that identifies and responds to the needs of local young people. Using informal sports and social educational programmes, the centre makes an essential contribution to their lifelong learning and career development. The centre operates a wide range of programmes and activities. For more information, please contact us:

Berner Centre  
Ponler Street  
London E1 1QN  
tel: 020 7480 7673  
email: [noor.uddin@towerhamlets.gov.uk](mailto:noor.uddin@towerhamlets.gov.uk)



# Bengali-Related Organisations in Tower Hamlets

## **Limehouse Project**

Cheadle House  
Copenhagen Place (Off  
Salmon Lane)  
London, E14 7EY  
020 7538 0075

## **Harford Street Multicentre**

1st Floor  
115 Harford Street  
London, E1 4FS  
020 7780 3110

## **Spitalfields Small Business Association**

15 Greatorex Street  
London, E1 5NF  
020 7247 1892

## **Jagonari Women's Educational Centre**

183-185 Whitechapel Road  
Whitechapel  
London, E1 1DN  
020 7375 0520

## **Brick Lane Jamme Masjid**

59 Brick Lane  
London E1 6Q L  
020 7247 6052

## **Bangladesh Welfare Association**

39 Fournier Street  
London, E1 6QE  
020 7247 2105

## **Vopel**

The Garrett Centre  
45 Blythe Street  
London, E2 6LN  
020 7739 9272

## **Brick Lane Circle**

2 Boden House  
Woodseer Street  
London, E1 5JF  
07960 844 117

## **East London Mosque**

82-92 Whitechapel Road  
London, E1 1JQ  
020 7650 3000

## **Bangla Noboborsho Udjapan Parishad**

12 BJ House  
Hollybush Gardens  
London, E2 9QP  
07950 483 696

## **Bishwo Shahitto Kendro**

Brady Arts Centre  
192-196 Hanbury St  
London, E1 5HU  
07984 427 989

## **Isle of Dogs Bangladeshi Assoc & Cultural Centre**

Cubitt Town Library  
Strattondale Street  
London, E14 3HG  
020 7538 1650

## **Soulfire Theatre**

42 Foley House  
Tarling Street  
London, E1 0AZ  
07890 324 552

## **Udichi Shilpi Gosthi**

Brady Arts Centre  
192 – 196 Hanbury Street  
London, E1 5HZ  
020 7375 3781/0795

## **Tamarind Theatre Company**

Brady Arts & Community  
Centre  
192-196 Hanbury Street  
London, E1 5HU  
020 7364 7906

## **Wapping Bangladesh Association**

Wapping Youth Club  
Tench Street  
London, E1W 2QD  
020 7481 9835

## **Bangla Town Restaurant Association**

Bengal Village Restaurant  
75 Brick Lane  
London, E1 6QL  
020 7366 4868

## **Bangladeshi Students' Association**

271a Whitechapel Road  
London, E1 1BY  
07984903261

## **Sanaton Association**

6 Lister House  
Lomas Street  
London, E1 5BG  
0798 5521 233

## **Betar Bangla Community Radio**

Studio 6  
10 – 14 Hollybush Gardens  
London, E2 9QP  
0202 7729 4333

## **Apasenth**

The Brady Centre  
192-196 Hanbury Street  
London, E1 5HU