

# Education : The Bengali community of London

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**E**AST London is considered to be one of the most deprived inner-city areas of Britain. It has historically been a grim reservoir of cheap labour on which the economy depended. Now it is increasingly becoming the wasteland of an industrial society in decline, that has no more use for the labour of thousands of its residents, and which no longer needs to provide the minimal standard of living, so long associated with the welfare state. Working class people have never been considered worthy of quality education—their role has been pre-ordained as labour in industries and services. Benefitting the least from an economic boom and suffering the most in times of recession, the black working class of Britain bears the full brunt of this still pervasive ethos but their situation is made worse by the deep rooted racism that has a strangle-hold on the social fabric of the country. The quarter million strong Bengali community in Britain of whom some 50,000 live in East London is particularly affected.

In the post-war period increasing numbers of Bengalis began to be recruited in Britain as cheap labour Working primarily in foundries, and the rag and catering trades. Substantial numbers of single Bengali men found themselves in East London in the fifties. It was not until the mid-sixties and early seventies, after years of battling against racist immigration policies that men could bring their families to join them in the U.K. It was in this period that the sense of a Bengali community in Britain began to emerge. The emergence of the Bengali community brought about a substantial dependence on statutory services, particularly in terms of housing, social services and education.

The way in which racism in education has affected the Bengali community in Britain is the subject matter of this paper. Young Bengalis are coming out of schools without even a basic education. They have no hope of entering higher education nor can they find employment. The traditional employment sectors are saturated. The level of achievement among Bengali children is among the worst, a fact highlighted in

the Swann Report of 1985.

It has been absolutely clear to those of us active or interested in the field that the fundamental cause of underachievement is directly related to the manifold manifestations of racism in education, not least of all the high levels of racial violence allowed and tolerated in schools up and down the U.K.

East London is a vivid testimony to this situation. In a community of over 200,000 Bengalis growing by 9000 per year, more than a quarter are settled in the East London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Within the Inner London Education Authority, Bengali speakers constitute by far the largest group for whom English is a second language. In Tower Hamlets more than half the primary school intake is Bengali and over half the babies are born to Bengali mothers. A good number of secondary schools have between a 50-90% proportion of Bengali pupils.

The way in which this young and growing community is developing is deeply affected by a system of education that marginalises and contains them as opposed to imparting learning and knowledge.

Internal barriers include matters such as the level of motivation towards education generally, the level of parental involvement in education, the attitude towards educating women, the level of general politicisation and awareness of educational issues. No one will dispute that there is scope for improvement in the existing situation within the community in these areas. However there is a strong feeling about the apparent failure of the education system and more and more parents and activities are becoming directly involved in campaigning groups and as governors of school. School students are making strenuous efforts to organise themselves

against the pervasive racism in schools. More and more young women are entering community work and becoming active. The Bengali community is a dynamic one in spite of the stultifying odds it faces. The fundamental obstacles to a good education for Bengalis is external to the community but greatly influence the state of the 'internal' barriers. The parental involvement question exemplifies this:

Whereas it may be considered by some that Bengali parents do not care much about their children's because they don't maintain contact with their schools, what is much more pertinent as a causative factor is the often unwelcoming and hostile atmosphere of these schools, exacerbated by a lack of bilingual staff. The fact that notices and letters to Bengali parents are very often in English does not help.

External barriers to education for Bengalis can broadly be subdivided into (1) Racial Violence (2) Institutional Racism

**RACIAL VIOLENCE**  
The first and most obvious barrier to the education of black children is the level of racial violence and harassment that they encounter in schools. This problem is most acute in secondary schools and is a cause of great concern in East London. At least half of the fourteen secondary schools in the borough have had serious problems of racial violence including stabbings, gang warfare, and mini-riot situations.

Because the day to day racial tensions in schools are allowed to fester and grow, the cumulative impact can often be horrendous. It is this process that inevitably gives rise to flash-points where the issue of racial violence peaks and blows the lid off an institutional policy of containment and concealment. In 1984

Stepney Green school was in focus when a fourteen year old Bengali boy was brutally beaten up and stabbed. In 1985 Daneford School was in the news and the Campaign Against Racism in schools organised an inner-London wide demonstration in which three hundred schools and three thousand five hundred people demonstrated against racism in the ILEA as manifest in its schools. This was the first time that the issue of racism in schools led to an inner-London wide strike (although unofficial because of union refusal to endorse it) demonstrating the strength of anti-racist feeling and reflecting the magnitude of the problem faced in Daneford and other schools. Daneford had become a flash-point precisely because of the long-standing racism in that school and the level of physical racial violence. Pupils were kept at home in large numbers by parents as physical security became the prime concern. Stabbings were taking place in the corridors and mini-riot situations were breaking out. Kids were coming into school with weapons. The ILEA response was to say little and do less. It was the arrest of 12 teachers and activists in front of the ILEA Divisional Office in Tower Hamlets protesting at the situation at Daneford that brought home to many for the first time the intransigence and racism of the ILEA and the brutality of the police which assaulted and arrested people arbitrarily. County Hall, the offices of the ILEA, was strongly lobbied twice by hundreds of pupils, parents and teachers.

Crucial connections between anti-racist teachers and members of the community and support from other boroughs made the Campaign

Against Racism in Schools an effective one and led to mass action on 22nd November, 1985. Since then the climate in Daneford school has changed substantially and a permanent forum with the community has ensured major improvements within the general constraints.

In more recent years there have been serious incidents at Horpeth and St Paul Way schools. The cycle continues as more and more tension builds up in the schools of East London.

The ILEA and other Local Education Authorities exhibit an unwillingness to challenge the actions of their head teachers and other senior staff, no matter how obviously racist their attitudes and actions are. Here lies the most fundamental weakness of the ILEA's anti-racist policy. The policy is on paper and there is no mechanism to ensure its implementation, if, as is most often the case, the management responsible for implementing anti-racism, in fact constitutes the most formidable barrier to anti-racist initiatives. Can anti-racism be taken seriously if authorities remain unwilling to set up structures which will make its implementation a priority irrespective of the subjective inclinations of heads and other managers?

This brings us on to the issue of institutional racism. The negative impact on the education of Bengali children begins long before the child comes to school. Racist immigration policies force families to remain divided for many years. The process of sorting out interviews and red tape can go on for several years, invariably disrupting normal family life and education. The long delay in coming to the U.K. causes children to come at an age when smooth transition into

the English school system becomes impossible. The appalling lack of support for overcoming the linguistic handicap and the inability to cope with the major changes encountered by pupils, render intolerable an already difficult situation. Add to this the fact that thousands of Bengali children are homeless because of racism in the planning and allocation of housing. This often means that for several years after coming to the UK thousands of children are shuttled from one temporary accommodation to another, after being forced to change school several times. This has taken a much more serious turn as Tower Hamlets council has decided to evict 100 Bengali families because they are supposed to have left homes in Bangladesh making themselves "intentionally homeless". Hundreds of Bengali children may now find themselves on the streets or taken into care by the state. There is also the factor of the daily racial harassment, abuse and attack families face in housing estates and the streets. Only those who have lived in constant fear can understand the great damage this causes in terms of both physical and mental security. Finally, there is the appalling housing situation of many Bengali families, the state of their immediate environment and their overall socio-economic deprivation.

Having made the point that in the ultimate analysis racial violence in schools and educational establishments can be tackled only by an institutional commitment to do so, we have to consider other aspects and manifestations of institutional racism in education.

1. In spite of general loud noises about the underachievement of Bengali youths and the disproportionate level of harassment they face—there has been no research done on the educational needs of the community and the way in which the Euro-centric English Education system is failing us.

To be continued