

Archiving the History of a Social Movement: Tandana-Glowworm, The Asian Youth Movements Archive

Anandi Ramamurthy

Department of Humanities, University of Central Lancashire, UK¹



People engaged in struggle, especially in the heat of the moment often do not think about archiving their activity for posterity. The histories of social justice movements are often under researched because of the lack of archival sources. Many struggles and social movements express conflict with the state or the establishment and are therefore carried out by volunteers or organisations with limited financial resources. Archiving the histories of such organisations are a crucial part of tracing the multiple and complex histories of any society or era, yet many of these organisations emerge at particular historical moments and disintegrate or fragment after a few years due to changing political or historical conditions. Their records are destroyed due to multiple reasons including the break up of organisations, the disillusionment of participants who see the disintegration of their dreams, or through practical circumstances in which records are lost due to simple changes such as house moves or marriage. The histories of many African or Asian organisations in Britain are thinly documented because of such circumstances as are the histories of many working class struggles. For African and Asian organisations in post war Britain, as minorities and often as relatively new communities the problems were further exacerbated with the instability of families during a period in which they were still establishing their access to basic rights and the feeling at times of being ‘under seige’². Social movements as opposed to political parties are also organisations focussed on current issues and imperatives. They do not tend to have the long-term vision of a party, most of which preserve their records meticulously. Movements often change quite quickly with changing relationships and objectives. The priority of participants is to affect immediate change. All these issues impact on the researching and archiving of social movement history.

The political collection of the Linen Hall Library is a rare example of a substantial and thorough collection of the documents pertaining to a specific set of social movements in Northern Ireland. Started in 1968 it contains over a quarter of a million items. This collection, however was established by an institution whose remit was to record local Irish History. The experience for Africans and Asians in Britain is different since they are minorities in a society in which racism still impacts on their status as citizens. With regards to the histories of South Asians, only small archives of material exist such as the Grunwick Dispute Archive at Warwick University and

¹ The author is Senior Lecturer in Film and Media Studies, University of Central Lancashire, UK.
Email: anandi@mehood.info

² Comment by Balraj Purewal, Southall Youth Movement.

the Avtar Johal and the Indian Workers Association Collection at Birmingham City Libraries. The history of the largest migrant communities in Britain has been given a substantial boost through the Moving Here project under the National Archives, which links materials from a variety of archives and museums through a digitised archive with web access. (www.movinghere.co.uk). The material of South Asian organisations struggling for social and political rights is however poorly represented since so little exists within established institutions. This history is crucial to an understanding of British history as well as the power of anti-colonial struggles and their aftermath.

Tandana-Glowworm is an archiving project involved in collecting political ephemera relating to the Asian Youth Movements of the 1970s and 1980s. www.tandana.org. It is hoped that the project can be extended in the future to collect other parts of the history of struggle by the South Asian communities for social and political rights. The aims of Tandana are:

1. to archive the visual and ephemeral culture of South Asian struggle in Britain for social, cultural and political rights.
2. to give value to this heritage through
 - [a] the creation of a centralised and accessible archive
 - [b] the collection of supportive and contextual documentation with archive material to enhance understanding of and value of this heritage
3. to digitise the ephemera and make this heritage accessible through the web to allow access by as wide a number of people as possible.

Since the 1900s numerous organisations were formed in Britain to struggle against racism and campaign for national liberation in Africa and Asia. In the post war period as migration from the former colonies led to sizeable communities of Africans and Asians in Britain new organisations emerged that were specifically concerned with the social and political conditions for migrant workers. Over the last century South Asians living, working or studying in Britain formed organisations to air their concerns first over Indian sovereignty and later over the rights of South Asians living and working in Britain as the size of the South Asian Communities increased. The decision in the first instance to simply collect material relating to the South Asian communities was not taken with the intention of dividing communities in struggle. For Tandana, the decision to collect material relating to South Asia was simply made because of the need to draw realistic boundaries for collecting.

The decision to digitise was taken for the following reasons: Firstly the quality of many of the leaflets and posters is poor and will inevitably deteriorate very quickly. It is therefore valuable to digitise the material as a way of preserving it. The people who produced this history were also more concerned with the meanings and messages that they wished to convey. The aura of the object is therefore not the crucial issue. Much of this material, because it is a peoples history also belongs to family histories and digitisation allows communities to share material relating to their histories without having to part with them. Digitisation also allows the material to be made accessible through the web. This allows wide access to the material by groups who would not

normally visit archives or museums. This has also been acknowledged by Glasgow University archivists in the creation of *Red Clydeside: A Digital History Of The Labour Movement In Glasgow 1910-1932*. This digitisation project was funded by national organisations such as SCRAN (Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network) and the Resources for Learning in Scotland consortium. In England, the Heritage Lottery Fund has also begun to recognise the value of such digital resources and has funded the Tandana-Glowworm project. It remains to be seen how many similar projects they will be prepared to fund.

Why choose the history of the Asian Youth Movements?

Although the experience at the Linen Hall Library has indicated that collecting the history of social movements is best done contemporaneously, the majority of archives and libraries are rarely able or willing to take this responsibility. One of the key funding bodies for the development of archives, the Heritage Lottery Fund has also chosen to define heritage as material which is at least 10 years old, making it even harder to collect contemporaneously. Tandana-Glowworm has chosen to focus in the first instance on the Asian Youth Movements for the 1970s and 1980s since there are so few records in established institutions that cover this history and much of the extant records are in the collection of individuals making their long term existence precarious.

The Asian Youth Movements were the first political expression of Asian Youth in Britain from the large-scale post war migration. The mid 1970s saw increased unemployment with the decline of industries including the textile industries in the North, which had been the focus point of migration for large sections of the Asian community. This period also saw heightened fascist and racist activity, increasing police violence and the institutionalisation of racism through discriminatory immigration laws and the 'bussing' of Asian children out of their communities. Embryonic youth organisations were already forming such as the Indian Progressive Youth Association in Bradford in 1975. Racist murders such as the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall was the spark for a new organisation: the Southall Youth Movement. This organisation, made up of young Asian men, took it upon themselves to defend their community against fascist and racist attacks. Their formation inspired young Asian men and women from across Britain to organise in defence of their communities. It was a massive social upheaval, involving thousands of young Asians throughout Britain. The Asian Youth Movements that formed in Bradford, Sheffield, Manchester, Coventry, Leicester, Birmingham, London as well as in small towns such as Bolton, Burnley, Luton and Watford fought to defend their communities against fascist attacks; against police violence and racism; against the violence of state racism that separated mothers and children through increasingly tight immigration laws. They also supported the struggle of black workers in their areas. The AYM's in each area had their own characteristics, supporting local defence and immigration campaigns as well as offering solidarity to their brothers and sisters across Britain. Some such as Bradford, Sheffield and Birmingham saw themselves as part of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles across the world. Others were more focussed on Britain and local issues. All shared the desire to create a broad based secular South Asian unity as well as

solidarity amongst all black people. The AYMs remained strong and independent organisations until about the mid 1980s

The establishment and experience of the AYMs is an expression of the fermentation of a very British kind of identity. They saw themselves as Asian (as opposed to Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian), Black and also as part of a larger underclass of workers in Britain. In the North in particular many of the key organisers were also former members of white left organisations, where they had often felt frustrated at the lack of attention given to issues affecting their own communities. This organisational history impacted positively on the way in which the youth movements organised themselves and mobilised support. They were not rag bag groups of young people floating aimlessly, but usually took conscious steps to become involved, accepted the aims and objectives of their organisations and on occasion were expelled if their behaviour was unacceptable.

Previous expressions of political involvement such as the Indian Workers Associations (IWAs) were rooted in sub continental politics. They were initially set up to mobilise support for independence and to organise cultural activities to bring Indians and Britishers together. While these organisations played an important and key role in the establishment of workers groups in Britain, they carried with them some of the problems which dominate Indian society, particularly that of caste. While the AYMs were hardly free of the politics of caste, they represented the youth as a new second generation. Their parents as first generation migrants had taken a much more appeasing position in relation to racism and discrimination. They wanted to avoid rocking the boat. The Asian Youth Movements were about living in Britain – ‘Come what may we are here to stay’ as one slogan asserted, or ‘here to stay – here to fight’ was another. Many members were not born in Britain in fact, but they came over as young children as opposed to adults and formative years of their development took place here. They were forced into accepting that Britain was their home. There was less illusion over the myth of return. As a result they were determined to fight for their right to live without discrimination.

These movements were also formed after the collapse of the British Empire, not just in the subcontinent, but right across Africa. The struggle for an independent Zimbabwe was active as was the struggle against apartheid during this time and these international struggles inspired the youth in Britain. The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movements had also changed the perspective and outlook of many and how they believed it was possible to change their society.

The AYMs were also secular organisations, which given the recent increase in Islamophobia make it a valuable history in indicating the ways in which individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds were able to work in solidarity with each other. All these points make the history of the AYMs historically important both for British social history and the history of the left in Britain.

Why collect this now?

In Bradford a beautiful collection of posters produced by the AYMs, giving evidence of their solidarity work with Trade Unions and the Irish Republican cause have disappeared in the last ten years. The longer the material is left uncollected, the less material that is extant. As has been already been stressed, social movements are often poorly resourced, change rapidly with participants drifting apart leaving no organisation or person dedicated to maintain the history of the movement. Individual disillusionment also can often leads to material being discarded. The AYMs were active about twenty years ago, many of its members are now in a different phase of their life and some of this material has already been discarded. Even where material has been kept, because 'I did not want history to be re-written',³ as one former member of the AYM in Sheffield declared, poor conditions like damp cellars have lead to valuable historical material being lost or spoiled. The Asian Youth Movement Archive will be accessible through the web by 1 May 2005. The archive consists of documents in the collection of former AYM members. The archive does not simply include material from campaigns that were run by the AYMs but also material from campaigns, which they supported. The archive is a valuable collection of documents relating to anti-racist struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. It is hoped that the archive will be useful to activists, researchers, and young people thinking about the conditions of their own lives. To contact or contribute to the archive please mail info@tandana.org.

³ Comment by Matloob Hussain, Asian Youth Movement, Sheffield