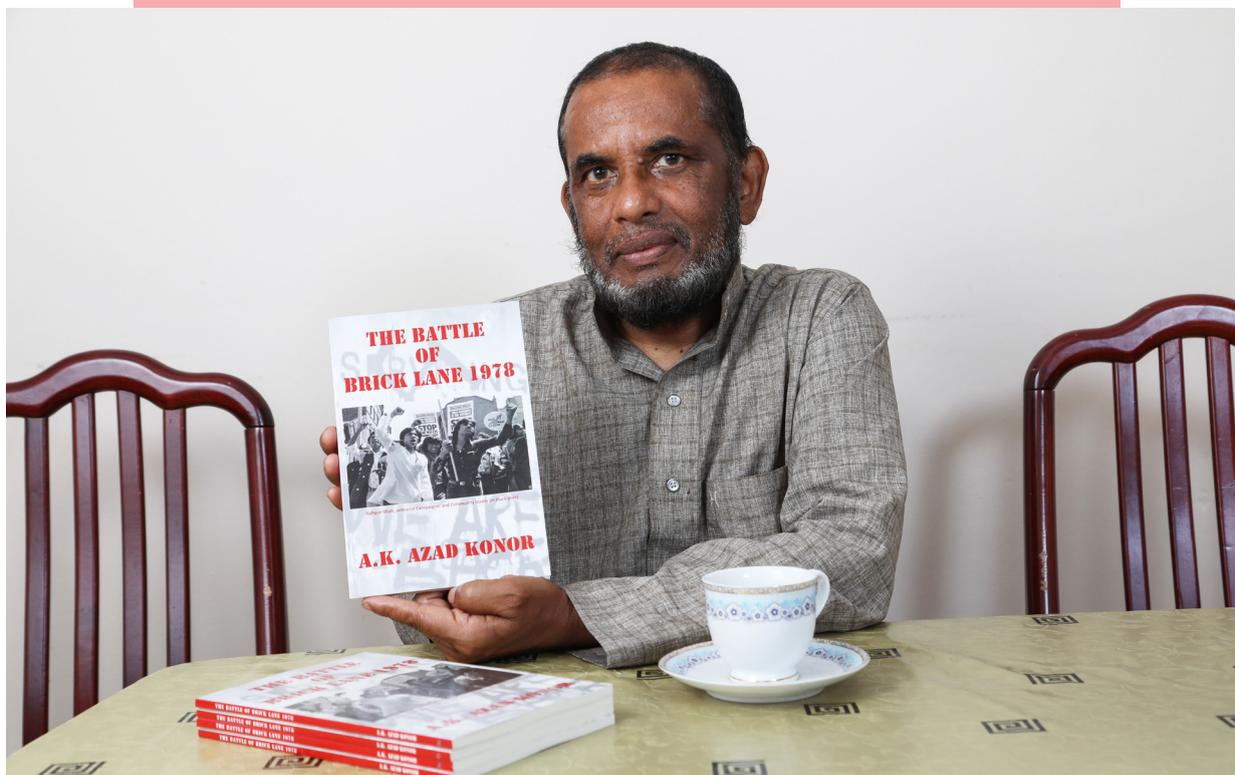


MY LONDON STORY

Forty years ago, Azad Konor led the 'Battle of Brick Lane', as the East End's Bangladeshi community stood up to racism and violence



'Our neighbours threw stones at us'

I ARRIVED IN England in 1972 after the Bangladesh War of Independence with my mum and two brothers. My dad was already living in London and all five of us moved into a cramped one-bedroom flat in Elephant & Castle. Those first days in London were really exciting. I was 14 and I thought we had a bright future ahead of us. But that all changed after a few months. My older brother and I started to get in fights with other schoolkids, who'd make racist remarks while teachers turned a blind eye.

In 1975, we moved to Brick Lane. Although there were a few Bangladeshi families living there, it was a white-dominated area at that time, and the National Front was active. Bangladeshi families' letterboxes were set on fire. Our next-door neighbours would throw stones and swear at us. We weren't safe anywhere: home, school or work. We stayed in groups when we went out. It wasn't exactly the better life we'd dreamed of.

I felt like I had to do something, so I helped found the Bangladesh Youth Front in 1976. There were 21 of us in the beginning, hoping

to find solutions to housing inequality and racist attacks. We didn't have any funds or office space so we'd meet up regularly in Canon Barnett Primary School. It was the only safe space we had, and we'd also hold drama classes there and play football and badminton.

I'll always remember May 4 1978. That was the day Altab Ali died. A textile worker who'd recently arrived to the UK from Bangladesh, Ali was fatally stabbed by three teenagers in a racially motivated murder in St Mary's Park after he left work. It was a local election day and he was planning to vote later that evening. He never got the chance. We were terrified. I thought: Am I next? It was a turning point for the British Bangladeshi community. We were shaken, but determined that his death wouldn't be in vain. We started to mobilise ourselves.

The focus of the BYF changed overnight. Ten days after Ali's death, 10,000 of us marched from Brick Lane to 10 Downing Street behind a car carrying his coffin. Joined by the Anti-Nazi League and the SWP, we handed over a petition to Prime Minister James Callaghan. It was the biggest Bengali-led demo in British history, and

my colleagues and I were at the front, waving placards and chanting 'Black and white unite!' Our message to the British public and the world was clear: we wanted to live just like any other Londoner, without fear of violence and murder. We'd already lost someone. We didn't want to lose another.

After the 'Battle of Brick Lane' we continued fighting for long-lasting change in housing and healthcare. Forty years since Ali's death, it's so rewarding to see our legacy: the next generation of British Bangladeshis and Asians, including MP Rushanara Ali and Baroness Uddin, who have started to represent and fight for the rights of our community in mainstream politics. There are fewer barriers for Bangladeshis than there once were, though institutional racism sadly still lingers in British society, from the NHS to the police. The fight still isn't over. ■

Interview by Salma Haidrani

→ 'The Battle of Brick Lane 1978' by AK Azad Konor is available now.

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