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Ward, Paul

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We have come a long way: The Labour Party and Ethnicity in West Yorkshire

Paul Ward

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‘We have come a long way’ is how Jamil Akhtar summarises the experience of Pakistani immigrants in Britain since the 1960s. It is a description that applies in a number of ways. Most tellingly, it suggests the way in which the journeys immigrants make are not at an end when they arrive at their destination but continue in their day-to-day lives as they seek to negotiate places within the ‘host’ society. This negotiation occurs in a wide variety of organisations in civil and political society and this chapter, by drawing on a number of oral histories, aims to consider the journeys of immigrants through the Labour Party and movement, of which Akhtar has been a member for three decades. In general, this is an optimistic story. The major theme of the oral histories might be considered to be the integration of ethnic minority groups into British society through political participation, especially in the trade unions and Labour Party. This integration, as the interviews reveal, was not automatic nor without extensive racism and reluctance to allow black and Asian participation. The interviewees reveal the determination and tenacity that immigrants had to have in securing acceptance within the Labour Party, but also that recognition within Labour marked a wider admission into society on their own terms.

This chapter cannot hope to achieve comprehensive discussion of the variety of experiences of immigrants in the Labour movement in West Yorkshire. Most of the interviews on which this chapter is based were conducted as part of a research project into responses to racism in Huddersfield in the 1970s. It also excludes those black and Asian Britons who have given support to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in West Yorkshire, such as Khizar Iqbal, Conservative councillor for Dewsbury South since 1999.

The statistics for immigration into West Yorkshire both conceal and reveal the extent of diversity of the ‘immigrant experience’ at the same time. From the 1960s Yorkshire was experiencing a wave of non-white immigration as people were drawn from South Asia and the West Indies by employment in the textile mills, foundries, engineering and chemical works, as well as public transport. These migrants came in quite small numbers. In 1971 the population of the West Riding stood at 3.8 million, and it was estimated that there were only 85,000 non-white immigrants – that is 2.3 per cent of the population.¹ By the mid-1980s about eight per cent of West Yorkshire’s population was not white.² Of course, different parts of the county had different numbers of immigrants, so by the mid-1980s Bradford’s Asian population had reached nearly 60,000, of whom 43,600 were of Pakistani origin and 16,000 were from India.³ Two-thirds of these lived in four wards in the inner-city including Manningham Lane and Little Horton. One example of Bradford’s difference from Huddersfield was the strength and importance of the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford. One of the founders, interviewed by Robert Perks in 1985, explained that the AYM ‘was specifically designed to say “Look, we’re Asian and proud of it, and we’re going to fight racism.”’⁴ The movement’s formation reflects the difference age can make to experiences of ethnicity. The organisation, while expressing Asian identity, was a deliberate break with the past, in that its focus was on events in Britain, rather than the continuing interest of organisations such as the Indian Workers’ Association in the politics of the Indian sub-continent.⁵ Marsha Singh, one of the founders in Bradford, is currently Labour MP for Bradford West.

The stories of immigration are as numerous as the numbers of immigrants, for while migration might be a global process, it entails the experience of millions of individuals. The use of oral history, this hybrid form of autobiography and biography, throws light on

¹ Donald Wade, *Yorkshire Survey: A Report on Community Relations in Yorkshire* (Leeds, 1972).

² Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration* (Oxford, 1992), p. 15.

³ David James, *Bradford* (Ryburn, Halifax, 1990), p. 177.

⁴ Quoted in Robert Perks, “‘You’re Different: You’re One of Us.’ The Making of a British Asian”, *Oral History*, 15 (1987), p. 72.

⁵ There is an electronic archive of primary sources on the Asian Youth Movement at <http://www.tandana.org/pg/index.htm>

what otherwise remains in the realm of the discussion of impersonal forces, such as global economics and ‘push and pull factors’.

The two major figures featuring in these interviews were Jamil Akhtar, currently acting chief executive of Kirklees Racial Equality Council, and F.A. Khan, a retired bus driver.⁶ Khan arrived in West Yorkshire first, migrating from Pakistan to Huddersfield on 22 June 1961. Arriving at Heathrow, he knew only one person in Britain, a friend who lived in Huddersfield. He quickly secured work as a plate moulder in an engineering company. After a discussion with a shop steward, he joined the engineering union. ‘The union man,’ he said, ‘was a good person; he talked to me, that’s why I joined it. I was very young. He was a very reasonable person; he talked to me and explained to me to join. Since that time I’ve been a member of my union.’ Union activity drew him into the host society on the one hand but on the other, he had difficulty joining the Labour Party. ‘At that time in the Labour Party,’ he explained, ‘there was a lot of racism ... I applied for membership for three or four years and they never gave me membership.’ Once successful, he sought to recruit other Pakistani immigrants to the party and was asked by a white party member, only half jokingly, whether they were trying to take over the party. Malcolm Lee, the Liberal parliamentary candidate for Huddersfield in 1970 and 1974, suggested in another interview that the local Labour Party at the time were reluctant to counter racism because they feared a backlash among white voters.⁷ After a couple of years in engineering, Khan secured a job on the buses. While later public transport in Huddersfield became a common source of employment for Asians – both Pakistanis and Indians – Khan was the first Asian bus worker. As he explained,

There was only me, one Pakistani, when I joined, there was no coloured person at all. Certain people were against me there. They said I was going to send money home and this and that ... There were others who said, he’s a young man, he’s working hard. They were arguing with each other – if he’s not working is he

⁶ The tape of the interview is available in the University of Huddersfield Archives.

⁷ Interview with Malcolm Lee, 8 May 2003, University of Huddersfield Archives.

going to live on fresh air? So it was a real mixture. I was the first person, then two or three after that started working. I was the first Asian there.

Reactions to the newcomers were never straightforward. There was, as Khan says, 'a real mixture'. After five or six years, Khan became a shop steward for the Transport and General Workers' Union, and it was through such activism that he made friends with Jamil Akhtar. Akhtar had migrated to Britain from Pakistan in 1963. At first he was a student at Huddersfield Polytechnic and began work on the buses in 1970. He too joined the TGWU 'through conviction rather than need' and like Khan became a shop steward. Both were clear that while they met hostility from some of their white co-workers, their union activism gained them many friends and supporters. At each level of their union activity it was their success in securing good working conditions that led to acceptance by an often racist white membership.

A study of racism in the late 1960s had attempted to quantify racism in British society. E.J.B. Rose in *Colour and Citizenship* estimated that in areas with high proportion of 'coloured' residents, such as Huddersfield, over one-third of white interviewees expressed views with no trace of hostility and a further two-fifths more were 'strongly disposed in the direction of tolerance'. On the other hand there were ten per cent, he suggested, who held 'almost unconditional antipathy' towards the immigrants.⁸ The ten per cent were more vocal and newsworthy than the majority. And their numbers could expand when mainstream and maverick politicians sought to exploit tensions for their own purposes. In the late 1960s Enoch Powell, a leading Conservative, took up the leadership of this hostility, most famously in his 'Rivers of Blood' speech in April 1968 in which he forecast racial violence unless immigration was not only stopped but reversed. That such a prominent figure could voice such prejudices encouraged the hostile minority and the repercussions were felt by individuals in the towns and cities of Britain. In 1967 the National Front had been formed and had received some small measure of support in West Yorkshire. An NF member in Huddersfield told the journalist Paul Foot that:

⁸ E.J.B. Rose, *Colour and Citizenship: A Report on British Race Relations* (London, 1969), pp. 552-3.

We held a march in support of what Powell said and we signed eight people up as members of the branch that afternoon. Powell's speeches gave our membership and morale a tremendous boost. Before Powell spoke we were getting only cranks and perverts. After his speeches we started to attract, in a secret sort of way, the rightwing members of the Tory organisations.⁹

In 1969 the NF stood nine candidates in local elections in the town, receiving an average of 12 per cent per candidate. In 1970 they stood in 13 of the 15 wards and averaged more than 10 per cent of votes.¹⁰ It is little wonder that Eddy Morrison, an NF member at the time, should say that A.K. Chesterton, the party leader, 'was particularly impressed by the Huddersfield membership and the fact that they had their own Headquarters in the town'.¹¹

On two occasions in 1969 and 1970 the National Front mounted provocative demonstrations. In one instance there were rumours that Powell was coming to Huddersfield to speak and the National Front gathered in the Sparrow Park area, where many immigrants had settled. A café used by Pakistanis was attacked with stones and young immigrants including Khan, hearing rumours that the café was going to be set alight, turned out to defend it, armed with hockey sticks. Khan recalls that 'I was hitting with the hockey stick and the police arrested me and I got fined £2, you know. Our community was united that time, Indians, Pakistanis, Afro-Caribbeans, we were out together. Any real trouble and always all people come together.' While organisations like the Indian Workers' Association and the Pakistan Association¹² joined with the Huddersfield Trades Council, the Labour Party in this period continued to remain aloof from anti-racist activities, despite the membership of those like Khan and Akhtar. This was a period of immense fear – both Khan and Akhtar could recall violent attacks, often

⁹ Quoted in Layton Henry, *Politics of Immigration*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Figures from Stan Taylor, *The National Front in British Politics* (Basingstoke, 1982).

¹¹ Eddy Morrison, 'Memoirs of a Street Soldier: A Life in White Nationalism'. <http://www.aryanunity.com/memoirs3.htm>, accessed 16 May 2002.

¹² There is a taped interview with Nasim Hasnie OBE, one time president of the Huddersfield Pakistan Association in the University of Huddersfield Archives.

when they were working on the last bus of the evening. Yet the campaigns against the neo-fascist NF and racism more generally acted to integrate immigrants into the local labour movement.

In part, the prominence of the Communist Party in the trade union movement in the town encouraged links to immigrant groups such as the IWA and at the same time discouraged Labour from playing a fuller part in anti-racism. Union activists such as Akhtar and Khan encouraged the trades council, a focus of Communist activity, to take racism seriously. Stan Innis, chairman of the Caribbean Association and shop steward at David Brown's engineering firm in the 1970s argued at the time that,

As an active trade unionist I know that the unions can play an important role in combating discrimination. They are sometimes slow and do not realise the extent of the problem. By joining trade unions and actively participating in them black workers can push the unions along the right path. The onus lies a lot on us, since we cannot wait for others to help us along continually.¹³

Within the town, the trades council was responding to multi-racial issues. Bob Stoker, active on the council since the 1970s explained that

There were two issues in which the Trades Council were really, deeply, involved and it shows its anti-racism. One was support for the Grunwick workers [in 1977]. There were quite a few coaches that went down from Huddersfield to Grunwick. We collected, I can remember, at ICI and David Browns [an engineering works]. They had collections for the black workers at Grunwick. Also there was another issue, the deportation of Josephine Thomas... The Trades Council organised a petition against her deportation. Again loads of support.¹⁴

¹³ Quoted in Lionel Morrison, *As They See It: A Race Relations Study of Three Areas from a Black Viewpoint* (Community Relations Council, London, 1976). There is a taped interview with Innis in the University of Huddersfield Archives.

¹⁴ Quoted in Paul Ward with Graham Hellowell and Sally Lloyd, 'Witness Seminar: Anti-Fascism in 1970s Huddersfield,' *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), p. 127. The year-long Grunwick dispute in north-west London involved substantial numbers of Asian workers who had been sacked for joining a trade

Increasingly, Akhtar was playing a more visible role in the union than Khan. Both men married and had children, and above all their concern was to support their families and crucially to ensure that improvements in wages and conditions were secured collectively. Conditions on the buses were poor, as Khan explained: 'Cold buses, holding the light bulbs to keep warm, the buses had no doors, we had very long duty and that's why so many Asians worked on the buses, no one else wanted the job.' Akhtar was elected branch secretary, which brought him into close contact with the bus company management. He managed to negotiate (against a background of some militancy) a reduction in the working day from nine hours to six hours and twenty-six minutes by suggesting removal of the waiting time at the end of each route and the introduction of a rota that removed particular bus crews from particular routes. He summarized this achievement: 'Same job, same money, we got unity.' Such successes ensured his re-election as branch secretary, so he re-calls that 'a lot [of union members] would say blacks go home but they voted for me, I don't like you, they would say, you are too bloody minded but I know you will never sell me [out], that's why I voted for you ... There were racists, about five to ten per cent, but working conditions were good.'

As with many others in the union, Khan and Akhtar believed that Labour was their party and sought to draw in new members from areas of Asian settlement, such as Crosland Moor and Birkby. In the latter area, there were soon more Asians in the party than white members, and again they were asked 'Are you taking over the Labour Party?' Akhtar was now a recognizable figure in Huddersfield's labour movement and it was almost natural for him to begin to contest council seats. He fought four wards unsuccessfully in the late 1970s and 1980s, including Birkby, then a safe Conservative seat, and Lindley, which was also unwinnable. Other party members told him that he was wasting his time in such seats. When Newsome, a safe Labour seat at the time,¹⁵ became vacant, Akhtar was encouraged by some to stand but there was much opposition. This can be put in a national context. The numbers of non-white councillors in Britain were growing but were still

union. There were frequent mass pickets of the photo-processing works in which they had been employed. Josephine Butler was not deported.

¹⁵ It has now elected three Green councillors for a number of years.

very small in the 1980s. London had only four ethnic minority councillors in 1974, 35 in 1978, 79 in 1982, and 130 in 1986. In 1990 there about 135 ethnic minority councillors outside London, including only seven in Bradford, four in Manchester, and seventeen in Birmingham.¹⁶ Ethnic minority councillors were often seen as representing only a section of society – ‘their own community’ as it was perceived – so it was often considered that they should only stand in areas with substantial numbers of black and Asian residents. Of course, such assumptions were mostly unspoken. Akhtar was told that he was ‘the wrong person for the seat because he didn’t live there.’ At a party meeting he challenged this view, pointing to other councillors who did not live in their wards. He was then told that ‘the time was wrong; after five or ten years you’ll be alright. People are not ready and not prepared to vote for black people.’

Akhtar then asked the meeting for some honesty. He recalls telling the meeting that:

I don’t want any hassle, if the Labour Party people won’t support me I have no chance of getting elected, and even if I get elected I will feel very uncomfortable that the party didn’t support me, so I think you should be honest and say you are a black person and we don’t believe black people are capable. I will walk out of the room and not make a press statement; honesty is all I want from you. A man stood up and said he was ashamed as a member of the Labour Party, so I said I would do a deal – I want support – someone move that I should stand and if one person votes against I will not stand... Ten voted the rest abstained out of fifty. The chairman of the meeting said, ‘That’s it! Jamil is our candidate. If anyone doesn’t like it they can leave the Labour Party.’ And I lost by 31 votes in that election!

In the next election he contested, Akhtar was elected by 400 votes. This was a common and recurring experience, of opposition from within the labour movement to the advancement of people from ethnic minorities within the party and unions. Opposition was never absolute and with determination and an element of support from white

¹⁶ Jessica R. Adolino, *Ethnic Minorities, Electoral Politics and Political Integration in Britain* (London, 1998), pp. 44-9.

members, it was possible to secure greater representation. Akhtar recalls when he wanted to go on the TGWU's list of parliamentary candidates. 'They'd never had a black person on the list though they had about 60-70 MPs,' he explained. He was called for interview in Leeds, but as he continued,

My interview was at one o'clock but I was left waiting until five – with no cup of tea. I felt very demoralised and I thought I must be a bloody nutcase; other people were offered tea and newspapers. I was called at 5, I was young, and I hadn't sat down and the chairman said, 'why should we shortlist you. Give us one good reason' – I didn't answer, he shouted. I said you should have good manners, you haven't asked me who I am, a lot of you don't know me, I thought that would be a courtesy, to have told me you were running late, I could have got a sandwich and the chairman said sorry but it was nothing to do with them. They asked me about monetarism and long English words and I lost my temper and said I was quite amazed the way you are conducting the interview – what's Britain's GDP & France's GDP? they asked. The next day I phoned the full time officer and said I'd been expecting a phone call to say, 'Congratulations you are on the list!' 'You haven't rung, how did I do?' He said 'no comment.' I said I really did good! No comment. He said they thought I was 'rude and bloody-minded – you blew your top.'

Looking back, Akhtar sees this encounter in the 1970s as part of the journey, of coming a long way, for he was put on the union's list nearly ten years later, and in 2004 was on the short-list for the Dewsbury parliamentary constituency following Ann Taylor's resignation. The candidacy went, though, to Shahid Malik, the first British-born Muslim to be elected, in 2005, to the House of Commons. By this time, Bill Morris had also served as the general secretary of the TGWU, the first black general secretary of a union in Britain.

The relationship between immigrants and the Labour Party was often mediated by their membership of other organisations. Adolino has argued that both Asian and Afro-

Caribbean people are more likely to be involved in community organisations than the white population, because of the nature of the immigrant experience.¹⁷ Both Khan and Akhtar were leading figures in the Pakistan Association locally, and there was also a thriving branch of the Indian Workers' Association, as well as a branch of the Caribbean Association. These were not formally linked to the Labour Party, and indeed there were problems involving affiliation of such organisation to the Trades Council in Huddersfield, but they did help to ensure that the overwhelming majority of black and Asians immigrants, and subsequently their offspring, supported the Labour Party. Such community organisations began as responses to the special case of immigrants, but many immigrants saw themselves as part of the wider working class. An Asian Labour councillor explained that, 'Our problems are more or less the same as those of the white working class ... the problems are the same ... between blacks and whites, it is just a question of magnitude.'¹⁸ Community organisations saw themselves as involved in combating the special problems of immigrants and their children in the wider context of living within a multicultural and integrated society rather than as separating themselves from that society. Hence, as Adolino continues, 'A transition has been taking place among ethnic minorities from a primarily protest mode of participation to one of engagement in mainstream politics and institutions.'¹⁹

In Huddersfield, this could be seen in the development of the Huddersfield Action Committee against Racialism, formed in 1978. The committee was organised by the town's Joint Council of Labour. It drew together the anti-racist campaigns of the trades council and was the first time the Labour Party had officially taken leadership in anti-racist campaigns. Many Labour activists had been involved in anti-racism for a number of years but the party's orientation had mainly been to win elections in an unstable national electoral situation. The party had made statements against racism, such as that quoted in a Leeds election leaflet to encourage Asian voters to support the party:

¹⁷ Adolino, *Ethnic Minorities, Electoral Politics and Political Integration in Britain*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Quoted in Adolino, *Ethnic Minorities, Electoral Politics and Political Integration in Britain*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Adolino, *Ethnic Minorities, Electoral Politics and Political Integration in Britain*, p. 1.

In this country, as in others, a new dimension has been added to the struggle for equal opportunity by the existence of colour prejudice and discrimination.

Whatever the origins and incidence of such prejudice ... it is clear that we as Socialists must show our abhorrence of it and try to remove it from our society. Equal opportunity means equal opportunity for all people, whatever their difference in skin colouring, ethnic background or religion.²⁰

Yet Labour had remained apart from the militant campaigns against the National Front because of the leading role of Trotskyist organisations such as the International Socialists/Socialist Workers' Party. Nationally, the National Front was still advancing and in the delicate electoral situation – Labour were reliant on Liberal and nationalist votes in the House of Commons to keep them in power – the leadership were determined not to lose seats through the intervention of NF candidates who might split the Labour vote. The NF had done relatively well in the 1977 municipal elections and Labour feared their vote would grow further. In fact, in Huddersfield, the NF had passed its peak earlier in the decade. In 1969 and 1970 the NF had stood in most council wards but in 1971 they contested only six of the fifteen council seats, in 1973 only five, and in 1975 they put up only a single candidate. This meant that whereas nationally anti-racist campaigns were targeted at the NF by organisations such as the Anti-Nazi League, in Huddersfield the message was a more general one of multiculturalism and multiracialism.

One of HACAR's first initiatives was to organise a 'declaration of racial friendship' to be printed in the local newspaper, the *Huddersfield Examiner*, which declared that

At different times in the past people from overseas have brought their own contributions to these shores. Our way of life is the result of this mixture. ... We, coming from widely different backgrounds, and with varying political and

²⁰ Labour Party Working Party on Race Relations, quoted in Leeds Labour Party election leaflet, no date [1970s], www.movinghere.org.uk, accessed 23 October 2003.

religious beliefs, are supporting this declaration because we are agreed on the need to build a multi-racial community in Huddersfield.²¹

It was signed by about 300 local people including trade unionists, councillors, teachers, lecturers and church leaders. The main aspect of the work of HACAR was cultural. Tim Riley, who was on the committee, described how it sought to combat racism:

One of the things that HACAR was responsible for starting was the anti-racist carnival, or festival as it was originally, in Greenhead Park [in May 1978], which over the years became transformed into the Caribbean Carnival, which still continues to this day. It is now a big thing every year . . . it has become a bit de-politicised over the years, but it did start very much as a show of racial unity within the town.²²

The success of the carnival can also be measured by its entry into the mainstream of British society. Television celebrities with a local connection, such as Bill Owen, star of 'The Last of the Summer Wine', agreed to open one of the early carnivals. This was 'traditional' Yorkshire meeting the 'new' Yorkshire.

Such activities did extend the civic boundaries of the town, accommodating the cultural heritage of the immigrants, and as time passed, increasingly their children born in the county. Khan used a single instance to express the sense of integration in the town, explaining that his grown-up children had recently been on holiday to America with friends: two white, two Afro-Caribbean, one Indian and one Pakistani. Akhtar had become a councillor in 1989, and was to be re-elected for a dozen years. He stood as chairman of the highways committee and was elected, but such successes were too often marred by the actions of a minority of his fellow councillors and sometimes also by the attitude of council officials. On his election to the committee, one Labour councillor walked out and once working on the committee, Akhtar was given the impression by

²¹ *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 23 March 1978.

²² Quoted in Ward with Hellowell and Lloyd, 'Anti-Fascism in 1970s Huddersfield,' p. 128.

some local government officers that such a technical and professional post was considered beyond the capability of an Asian.

Akhtar's success points to the necessity to consider a variety of perspectives. He, and other black and Asian immigrants, had and continued to experience incidents of racism, yet had negotiated their way in to the day-to-day activities of the town. Serving on the highways committee, having been elected in a ward with a majority of white voters, acting for the town as a geographical community, did indeed represent the journey that immigrants had taken in the previous decades. The determination by new citizens of Huddersfield, and more widely of West Yorkshire, to contribute to the civic life of the town and county through Labour and the trade unions, and indeed other political parties and community organisations, ensured that there was not a deep sense of division within the town. There were of course serious riots in Bradford in July 2001 in response to the racist activities of neo-fascist organisations and a wider sense of neglect by young Muslims, and such issues certainly need addressing. This is not a journey that immigrants have taken alone, for the 'host community' had made much of the journey with them. In the late 1960s Enoch Powell claimed that 'the West Indian does not by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law, he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still.'²³ Yet by the end of the century, one poll suggested that less than thirty per cent considered that being born in England 'mattered a great deal to being English' and only twelve per cent considered that being white was important to Englishness.²⁴ Britons, white, black and Asian, have 'come a long way', and it has been through a society integrated by the organisations, national and local, including the Labour Party, that have made this possible. Of course, the journey continues, and has many obstacles, such the continuing 'war against terrorism' and the bombings in London in July 2005 by people born in Britain, which have led to much disillusion. Khan spoke of his reluctance to continuing to vote Labour (whereas Akhtar stood unsuccessfully for

²³ Quoted in Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London, 2004), p. 127.

²⁴ J. Curtice and A Heath, 'Is the English Lion about to roar? National identity after devolution', in R. Jowell and others (eds), *British Social Attitudes: Focusing on Diversity. The 17th Report* (London, 2000), p. 169.

Labour in the 2006 council elections). Few would deny, though, that Labour and British society have not benefited from its diversity.