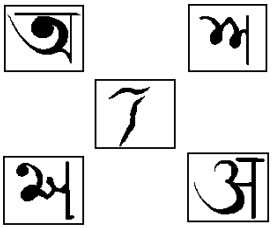
Across All Boundaries



Silver Jubilee Review

25 Years of Asian Resource Centre in Birmingham

Foreword

I am in the right place at the right time to be the person to commend this report to you. It is neither the story of survival, nor that of glory, but simple tales of living through a time – in a place. No time is more important than another time – no institution is more important than another one. Asian Resource Centre is a landmark, '25 years' is a milestone in time count.

Told through the voices of people who have been involved in working, managing, befriending and philosophising the Centre, the people and the neighbourhood of their time – 'a generation story' so to speak. You may enjoy reading it.

Javed Iqbal
Chair Board of Directors

30/05/2003

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Gargi Bhattacharyya, University of Birmingham

Surviving life in the Black Voluntary Sector

'Smaller community organisations at the local level play an integral part in community development. One of their great strengths can be sensitivity to local issues and culture. Many such organisations live a precarious, hand-to-mouth existence because of scarcity of funding. Despite this they will often have accumulated extensive expertise and knowledge of their specific areas. In some cases an organisation working at the neighbourhood level can offer unrivalled insight into the perceptions of local people about their community. They are generally well placed, given the right support and encouragement, to foster cross-cultural links.' (Local Government Association, 19)

The Asian Resource Centre has survived successfully for twenty-five years, in a period where many other black projects have folded. This review of the project is a chance not only to assess the work and progress of the Centre, it is also an opportunity to review the state of the black voluntary sector and to consider the position and priorities of black communities in contemporary Britain.

A proper understanding of the development of ARC and its evolving service provision requires an examination of the social and political context in which the project developed; a discussion of the formation of the black voluntary sector; and an assessment of the new challenges facing the organisation.

The report examines the approach of the ARC to the following issues.

i) the need to create a service to respond to the needs of Asian communities and to ensure that this service remains responsive to new needs;

ii) the wish to respond to failures of state provision and other forms of state racism;
iii) the need to create an independent black-lead organisation based in the community.

Handsworth in the 1970s

The Asian Resource Centre is a Handsworth institution. The Centre's shop-front has formed part of the local landscape for the last twenty-five years and Centre workers are well-known in the local neighbourhood.

'The Asian Resource Centre came into existence in November 1976, based on a growing belief, at that time, that it was necessary and desirable for Asian residents in Handsworth to have their own autonomous and physically distinct base for community activity.' (Progress Report 1979, p2)

During the 1970s, Handsworth had already been identified as a focus of black community organisation.

'A lot of that was to do with work around anti-racism and the growing activity of fascist organisations and the National Front – and also recognising that there were issues that were arising that were affecting black communities, Asian and African-Caribbean communities' AH

Handsworth drew a variety of talented activists into the neighbourhood not only because this was where Asian and African-Caribbean communities had settled, but also because there was a sense of activity and possibility. This was a place that black people were making their own. When I asked Azim Hajee about the campaigning focus of that time, his answer indicates that Handsworth was seen as a safe haven.

'Int: What were the key issues that people were organising around? Issues relating to police harassment, not so much racial attacks, anti-

fascist activity – interviewer: why not racial attacks? - I wasn't aware of any organisations that were that bold that they would come into Handsworth' AH

Handsworth is marked as 'our' space and that allows some exciting things to happen. When asked about the formation of the Asian Resource Centre, everyone was eager to explain that the ARC was just one of many inter-related initiatives taking place in the area. There is a sense that black people were working to create organisations that could meet their needs and aspirations.

'In those days, I am talking of 1975, 76, 77, there were a lot of problems in the area. Especially ethnic minority people would have a very poor deal at the hands of the authorities. It wasn't authorities' fault, although of course the racist factor was there, but a lot of them won't understand the issues. Nobody was there to explain to them as to what it involves. And of course ourselves, we needed to meet and work out our issues as well and work out our own unity as well.' MPU

In this process, the emerging 'voluntary sector' provided venues for meeting and a focus for shared activity. These community organisations were starting to form spaces for public debate and mobilisation.

'Activity tended to get focused around the voluntary sector organisations, or the voluntary sector organisations that were open enough to enable some level of organisation - the Lozells Action Centre, the Asian Resource Centre and subsequently the (Handsworth) Law Centre, and to some extent the Indian Workers Association' AH

Although Handsworth had been identified as a 'problem' area in the eyes of the state, community organisation in the seventies seems to be characterised by a high level of neighbourhood pride. That spirit of pride and potential is an essential component of the formation of the ARC.

'There was quite an atmosphere of activity around Handsworth – it felt quite good to be walking around Handsworth because you felt you were walking in an area where there was quite a high level of harmony, internal harmony, and there was a feeling of a kind of community. It was the part of Birmingham where if you had an orientation towards getting involved in community-type issues and political issues and so on, then Handsworth was a focus for that that was more real than anything else that was going on at the time.' AH

However, as well as this sense of activity and optimism, others also told me of the many battles that were fought by Asian communities, both for cultural recognition and for our basic rights.

'There not many teachers, no social workers from ethnic minority communities, no interpreters, no translators, and when we raised the question that we needed – well anti-racism was too far a cry in those days, but even multiculturalism – if we would ask, 'well at least recognise our languages, recognise that communication is not reaching our people'. When we would air those problems, sometimes sitting in the staff meetings, I remember once I said 'look, our kids are facing these problems and the education we are giving them is not inspiring for them.' One of the teachers who was quite active in politics as well said to me 'Mr Uppal, what do you want? Do you want these kids to be British or do you want them to be Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis' I said 'well – why not

Indian-British, Pakistani-British, Bangladeshi-British' That way we were having our battles and gaining ground inch by inch.' MPU

Formation of the centre

The Asian Resource Centre is created as part of this wider activity. Through the 1970s, black communities had become a permanent part of the geography of major British cities. Although mainstream politics continued to play on the white majority's fears of immigration, in fact, Asian and Caribbean communities had been settled for some time and a second generation of black Britons were growing up and expecting equal rights and treatment. The emergence of community-based organisations is part of this quest for social justice.

'It starts off at the time when a kind of gentle revolution was taking place – it wasn't quite gentle at some times – a comprehensive revolution in the way in which we looked at the world. It had started off with campaigns, single issue campaigns … I think what had happened in the early sixties was that there was the understanding that parliamentary democracy was not delivering the goods at neighbourhood level and was not satisfying people' RS

Handsworth already had the space of 40 Hall Road as a model of an open-door community centre and at the same time there were the parallel developments of the Action Centre on Villa Road and Lozells Action Centre. All of these projects spring from the ethos of self-help. Instead of waiting for the state or statutory services to come and solve their problems, self-styled community activists decided to organise their own solutions to local needs. Principally, this took the form of advice on a range of issues. However, several people remembered in interviews that Asian people made less use of these services than other sections of the Handsworth population.

‘Although it had its doors open to all people in Handsworth – it was in Villa Road at the time – that only certain groups of people were using it. Or rather, I should say, there were certain groups who were not using it as often as they should and that was the group of Asians who had made their homes as migrant settlers in Handsworth for well nigh twenty, thirty years by that time’. RS

The ARC emerges to meet the slightly different demands of the Asian communities – and provides a safe space and linguistically appropriate services. In this, the ARC represents an offshoot of the community activism movement and a chance for those who could have become ‘professionals’ and ‘gate-keepers’ to use their education and skills for the benefit of the wider community.

‘One of the things that came out of that student movement was the desire to give up what our destinations were [as] prescribed, as it were, as physicists, as engineers, as teachers, and actually to go out of that cycle and go back into neighbourhoods and to try and work on the principle of getting people to have power - to have some control over their lives’. RS

Although interviewees spoke about this in different ways, for many there was a sense that community service and activism could provide an alternative outlet for the skills gained from education.

‘The idea was that we would come into a community, we would be there only for a temporary period. We would try to do ourselves out of a job. The success of our venture would be the extent to which we were no longer required by local people. They would themselves decide what they wanted to do.’ RS

Community advice and self-help is regarded as a revolutionary political project, a process that will empower local people and enable them to fight their own battles, free of the patronage of mainstream political parties. Ranjit Sondhi, founder member of the Asian Resource Centre, explained the process that lead to the birth of the centre at that time;

'A group of friends … all felt that we should do something. That we should have advice sessions, loosely, and we should encourage women to learn English, have a library. Try and do everything from the cradle to the grave and provide something for everybody and we set up the Asian Resource Centre. We didn't get any funding from government or any statutory body, it came from the charitable grant-making bodies, it came from Cadbury's. And I think it was very significant at that time that it was only those types of institutions [charitable trusts] who were prepared to take that risk, to invest in new projects working around the notion of race and ethnicity, using race and ethnicity as a basis of radical grouping inside the wider community. They took a risk and they were proved successful.' RS

The role of charitable trusts, and of the Barrow Cadbury Trust in particular, is very significant in the formation and survival of these community-based organisations. Although the ARC celebrated the ethos of self-help, there was also a wish to provide suitable services for the Asian population. This required funds, and from a funder who would be sympathetic to the aims and methods of the centre. Cadburys recognised the value of black community organisation and, more than this, was willing to fund projects in a manner that allowed embryonic organisations to grow and flourish. Anthony Wilson explains the thinking behind these funding practices in his evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration in 1976;

‘The Trustees have found that working with groups whose experience of British industrial society is very different from their own, and whose sense of responsibility is to their own communities’ interests, tests the principles and practices of financial sponsorship much more sharply than those situations where there are unspoken assumptions held in common by recipient and donor. The aid has to be explicitly without strings; the only guarantee of its expenditure on agreed purposes is the good faith of the organisers.’

In practice this meant that Cadburys allowed a high degree of flexibility to black projects. Although the ARC, in common with other black organisations, did not have a highly developed management structure or procedures, the trust recognised the good-faith of the individuals involved and the importance of encouraging community organisation in black neighbourhoods. Anthony Wilson explained the thinking that informed Paul Cadbury’s wish to fund black projects;

‘He saw race as an index of deprivation in an inner-city context - which fitted in Handsworth – but wasn’t sufficient to bring in the justice side of things or the whole panoply of racist attitudes on the British side of it. He encouraged me to get stuck into Asian and Black groups in Handsworth, without quite realising what we were getting into – that this would raise justice issues, raise issues in terms of police relations.’ AW

The Trust sponsored black projects in poor urban neighbourhoods in part because the trustees saw the welfare of black people in Britain as an extension of their involvement in the struggles against colonialism.

‘It was where the trust came from, it was part of the liberal Quaker tradition – it didn’t find it all that easy to shift its attitudes to colonial liberation to social and racial justice in the UK. It was a great deal easier to talk about self-rule for India and the anti-apartheid and so on than it was to actually look closer to home’. AW

Sponsoring black groups drew the Trust into the larger politics of blackness – not only in relation to welfare, but also in relation to larger issues of social justice, including relations with the police and criminal justice system and the democratic representation of black communities. Whatever the discomforts raised by this interaction, by 1976 the Trust was able to argue for the positive benefits that black groups brought to British society;

‘The Trustees have extended their support to Black self-help groups over the years, as these have come to be the most effective agencies to identify the unconscious racism of British society. They believe that our democratic institutions need to be challenged now by groups which are able to express their vision of an open society; drawing on a mythological past when discrimination did not exist (‘the traditional tolerance of the British people’), provides no foundation for a Britain which must learn to live with the real tensions and opportunities of a multi-racial society.’ (Evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee)

Barrow Cadbury, through their experience of working with the black voluntary sector, became champions of the democratic potential of community groups. This fitted closely with the values of the Asian Resource Centre – by providing a space for welfare and other advice, there was the potential for raising larger issues of social justice. Black groups were well-placed to fulfil this role.

‘In Birmingham being able to address issues of poverty and justice for everybody was too big an issue, but for black groups who were getting themselves together to deal with just that were, from my point of view, a natural for a trust to team up with. We weren’t trying to lead it, we weren’t trying to conduct it or anything. It was what was happening there and we could join in with what we had to offer, which was money.’ AW

As well as money, Barrow Cadbury had developed a model for working with developing black groups and this allowed new organisations such as the ARC to build a relationship with the Trust.

‘The kind of grant support model that Cadbury’s had was that you were looking for a voluntary group that was getting itself together, initially with volunteers but before very long it would start employing staff, a co-ordinator or whatever they might be called. A number of Afro-Caribbean groups had started doing that already and again they would be doing it from the point of view of providing a service. So with ARC, I don’t suppose they modelled themselves consciously so they would be eligible for a grant … I would have thought this was just the received model for both grantees and applicants.’ AW

It was this relationship that allowed the Asian Resource Centre to begin its work and to continue to develop on a model of community activism.

Early objectives

In the early years of its existence, the ARC provides a focus for a range of Asian people who were beginning to break into mainstream organisations.

'When I first came to Britain in 1972, I was the first black social worker in the area and there was a huge huge problem of departments like mine dealing with Asian communities. In fact, they almost kept people at a distance saying 'Asians don't have a problem so we don't have to deal with them'. So the Resource Centre came about as a breath of fresh air to departments like mine.' MR

The Asian Resource Centre provides a forum for a variety of active individuals and formed an outlet for their interests and skills at a time when Asian people's needs were not recognised in mainstream services or workplaces. The ARC answers this lack, both as a service and as a place where Asian people could develop their own skills. However, despite the recognition that something is needed – there is no blueprint for what that something should be.

'We were still very green and we were still trying to find out exactly what kind of service the Resource Centre wanted to do. We didn't want it to be just like an immigration advice or just welfare advice. We wanted to do something that would make a difference to Asian people.' MR

This desire to make a difference to everyone in the community can be seen in the range of work that the centre engaged in. The early years of Centre see an engagement in a very wide range of work and activity – seeking to provide a focus for wider community

organisation and a method of empowering and energising different sections of the community, eg women and young people. The Centre provided a focus for youth clubs and women's groups, the open-door advice took up any issue that clients came with, there was no sense of setting centre workers up as 'experts' in any field. Instead there was an attempt to create a space for collective problem-solving.

'There are serious pitfalls in the business of giving advice. It is sterile and dangerous to offer advice to people that is likely to increase their general state of passivity and cynicism, their alienation and their reliance on individuals or institutions and hence the degree to which they can be manipulated by others. To avoid this there is a deliberate attempt at the Centre to offer advice in a way that calls on people's initiative and participation, that encourages self-activity and demystifies the structures that determine their lives.' (Progress Report 1979, p5)

ARC appears to have benefited indirectly from the failures of mainstream organisations and the extreme ethnic segregation of the city. Some individuals who become important to the development of the Centre seem to end up in the neighbourhood because there is nowhere else for black people to go. By default, some of these people gravitate to the Centre.

'I was teaching in an all-white school in Kingstanding would you believe – and I lived in Handsworth because that was the only accommodation I could find. The only place the authority could direct me was Handsworth and ironically it was a street behind Villa Road, Radnor Road.' SKO

Despite the intensive segregation of the city, from the beginning ARC sought to create a dialogue with mainstream services. Rightly or wrongly, ARC was viewed as a safe organisation to support.

'I don't think I ever anticipated that ARC was likely to be a thorn in the flesh in the way that some of the African-Caribbean groups were – because they were operating a rather different ethos. The big issue for ARC was the exclusion of the race awareness element in the provision of social services in Birmingham and here was ARC turning up all kinds of issues that one would have thought would be straight mainstream – employment, welfare, childcare, health, immigration. And yet there was no provision that recognised an Asian dimension to these'. AW

From a contemporary viewpoint, this approach can appear to be too soft and too forgiving of the failures of mainstream services. However, it is important to remember how fierce the battle for culturally appropriate services was at the time. We have become accustomed to hearing service-providers at least pay lip-service to the needs of diverse communities. In the seventies and early eighties, these arguments had not been won. Anthony Wilson spoke to me about the hurdles he faced when pursuing Barrow Cadbury's project of challenging racism.

'In education there was the debate between the colour-blind and the multicultural. I know there were schools in Handsworth where head-teachers gave me the colour-blind line, when we were prepared to go and support members of staff, black members of staff, who were concerned at the increasing 'alienation' of young black people. And heads giving me a very clear line that they did not see schools as paying any attention to that sort of thing, they were colour-blind, they were there for everybody. That was explicit in the case of those

schools, it was certainly implicit in the whole running of Birmingham public services. And that's what ARC was up against I think'. AW

The people involved in the Centre recognised the larger challenges of racism and the organisation's own reports argue that the failure to provide suitable services for all communities was a symptom of the systematic racism that pervaded British society. However, the Centre's primary focus was to obtain better and more effective services for Asian people – and although that project had a radical edge, it also required that the Centre work with a range of mainstream institutions.

'We didn't see them as, I don't think, as a thorn in the flesh of the existing services, they would have to be won over by collaboration not by opposition. Opposition was not going to make social workers more aware – sympathy is not enough, you need a lot more than sympathy. But having antagonism – no way was it going to achieve this. So one had to build up almost an alternative service and then say to social services, come on, where are you? And that was very much the ARC line and it fitted in very neatly to the kind of thinking we had on the Trust side – you could call it anti-racist integration'. AW

Work with women

From its initial formation, ARC has had a focus on issues facing Asian women. Most prominently, the Centre developed support systems for women escaping domestic violence and family crisis.
The first hostel was opened from April 1978 – at 28 Hall Road in Handsworth – and it provided safe accommodation for girls fleeing marriage and women facing domestic violence. From the very beginning, this service suffered from the scrutiny of wider society. The prevailing media stereotype in relation to the Asian community was its supposed cultural crisis and, in relation to this, the problems Asian culture posed for Asian women.

'There was also this growing interest from the media that the Asian community was having problems, its culture was breaking down'. MR

No-one I spoke to felt that this media interest was sympathetic to the needs of the Asian community. Then, as now, sensationalist accounts of runaway Asian girls and the conflict between generations served to confirm racist stereotypes of the Asian community and did not help to promote the aspirations of Asian women. However, this public interest did open a space for debate within Asian communities. Anita Bhalla explained that it was this debate that lead to the creation of the post of Women's Community Worker,

'It came about because the ARC had started speaking on public platforms and at conferences and had been engaging with all kinds of organisations that were saying 'look, what do we do with Asian women? What are the support systems? There was a huge national debate. All kinds of papers were being written at that time from so-

called experts on the 'runaway girls' syndrome. You name it, it was high profile, it was really really high on the agenda. There was a heightened debate in the country, an ill-informed debate, and one often hijacked either by academics but not often including the voices of Asian women … during that whole period I was never asked to comment on any aspect of my work other than 'can you do something on runaway girls?' AnB

In response to these debates, ARC started to develop emergency accommodation for Asian women and girls. However, developing the hostel service required a difficult negotiation with Asian men in the area;

'It was a very dangerous time, they nearly turned their back on the Resource Centre and we had to say to people 'there is already a problem - what's the difference if the child goes to social services or comes to us. We may be able to influence these children better'. MR

These negotiations formed a key part of the Centre's credibility. By engaging with other powerful community organisations on these issues, the ARC was able to develop political alliances that supported the organisation in other areas of work. However, it is important not to under-estimate how difficult this period of negotiation was.

'It was just a hard time. I was thinking, my God, what have I let myself in for. I was then working 24 hours round the clock, but I could handle that. What I couldn't handle was suddenly it came to the limelight. I had the Gurdwara demonstrations in front of the house and me being me, I would challenge them. The IWA [Indian Workers Association] gave me a tough deal and I think the best thing that actually came out of this was we actually got the IWA to

acknowledge that we have got a problem. Then I joined the IWA – we all did'. SKO

Many of the people I interviewed spoke of the close interactions between different organisations in the area, with overlapping membership and shared personnel between many groups. In relation to women's issues, the involvement of key women from ARC in other local political activity helped to add weight and credibility to the women's agenda.

'We also joined the IWA not because we were grateful for their support. We wanted to change women's issues in the IWA and our intention was to do that. The concern for us was also that they were accepting of this hostel, possibly, because of the personalities around. They trusted us – would they trust somebody else?' MR

Creating a full-time post for a Women's Community Worker embedded work with women into the permanent and public work of the Centre. Anita Bhalla, the first full-time Women's Worker, spoke about her appointment;

'I was working in Leicester as a community relations officer, working mainly with Asian women and African-Caribbean young people. I had an approach from the ARC initially to come and speak at a conference because I was trying to set up one of the first women's hostels in 77, 78, and it was an uphill struggle because the Asian community didn't want to engage in this debate.

At that time the ARC had already started to look at a property in Hall Road to see if it was possible to get a hostel accommodation up and running. They offered me the job – I didn't come straight away

because I needed to finish my project in Leicester, or at least secure it so that the hostel was up and running there.

When I took up the job at ARC, I was looking after the needs of the women, all the counselling, all the social security, legal stuff, representation, the whole thing. There was a huge amount of commitment from the ARC and especially the women on the executive committee who were all anxious to get this work done. Then the support work began in earnest. At the time we only had small units and they were not ideal and we wanted to create a purpose-built hostel to continue the work. So my work started in '79 and I kind of arrived and already there were women coming with difficulties.' AnB

There was never any doubt about the need for such a safe space – even without outreach and formal publicity, there was no shortage of women seeking the service.

'Interestingly, initially they were much younger girls, rather than older women, but within three or four months that started to change and we started to get older women escaping domestic violence.' AnB

However, the appointment of a full-time women's worker did not stop the ongoing discussions with men from the neighbourhood.

'When we had the debate around the table in the ARC, men would come and say 'You've got our daughter in the hostel, we want to talk to her', or men and women would come and demand access to a woman in the hostel who had been battered. We were able to say 'No, we don't do that, we don't work on that kind of a system. If you want to talk about it, let's discuss it in the wider community

forum. It was very unpopular with religious organisations, community groups and individuals and there was quite a lot of stick at that time. Especially when I started doing the women's work, we got more and more women. I don't think it is because we created it, it was just that suddenly there was somewhere that women could go to' AnB

ARC had decided that it was important to keep the hostel space close to the Handsworth/Lozells area – both in order to show that this issue was something that the local community must learn to deal with and so that women could keep the support of friends, relatives and the familiarity of an Asian neighbourhood. When the hostel moved from Hall Road to better premises in the early '80s, it was important that this was not seen as 'running away' from the community.

'Churchill Road was nice and it was in the heart of the community. We never wanted our hostel to run away. We obviously didn't want people to know about it but we didn't want it to disappear into white leafy areas of Birmingham, because we felt that on a point of principle the debate had to continue within the community' AnB

Throughout the '70s, the wider refuge movement was raising the issue of domestic violence across all communities and white-lead organisations such as Women's Aid were gaining a profile for hostel provision. I asked different women why they felt it was important to provide separate hostel space for Asian women,

'I think the problem of racism comes in if you are trying to work out a joint one. By that I don't mean … I think a lot of the community workers even then tried to be very politically correct and things and tried to be sensitive, but I think Asian women in particular needed –

I wouldn't just say linguistic needs – the whole understanding of their position in a society, in a community. So there was a need to develop something a bit more separately.' KJ

Through the '70s and '80s there was also an increasingly heated debate about the importance of women's self-organisation and groups of women from different communities came together to pursue a variety of political and welfare goals. A number of women who were connected to ARC were also members of Birmingham Black Sisters, a political group that brought together Asian and African-Caribbean women under a shared banner of black feminism. I asked why Asian women might choose to work within a mixed Asian project. The answer was, in part, pragmatic – ARC was getting things done.

'ARC was already involved in developing links, both nationally and locally, with different groups, I think it seemed logical that the Asian women should link with the ARC' KJ

However, others suggested that the hostel work benefited from the protection of the ARC – because the Centre was associated with well-respected men and this diffused the hostility to the hostel.

'I think patriarchy played quite a big role in that because it wasn't a women's project. It wasn't a group of women who said we are not accepting this, we are wanting this as a resource and this is why we want it - because there is something wrong with our community, something wrong with our men. It was actually male-headed – ARC workers were very well-respected, they had also been involved in lots of other bits and pieces of community development. So because people looked up to them and looked up to the ARC, for that reason anything then that ARC got involved in was well-respected.' SG

Growing Old in Britain – Developing the Elders' Project

The Asian Resource Centre has been lead by the need to improve the services received by Asian communities. As the Asian community became more settled in Birmingham, it became clear that Asian elders required a whole set of culturally sensitive services that were not being met by any mainstream service provider. In this area, as in others, the work of the ARC is formed as both a critique of and engagement with statutory agencies.

Due to the small number of Asian staff in these areas and the failure of mainstream organisations to develop suitable services, ARC is able to attract workers wishing to develop these areas of work.

'It was abundantly clear to me that big institutions were not geared to meeting BME [black and minority ethnic] needs and they were never going to change. OK there may be committed people like myself and some of my colleagues who would fight through our unions and so forth – but we were never going to change the structure of those organisations. So I thought OK, here's the challenge of an organisation that is looking to develop services for the elderly and I know people from the committee who were involved and were looking to raise funds for the elderly from social services.' AB

This move allowed workers to bring skills and experience from statutory services into voluntary sector – and to use their expertise to instigate change from mainstream service providers. Anil Bhalla described his own appointment as the Centre's Elders' Project Co-Ordinator in this way,

‘Well it’s time for me to move on to the voluntary sector – because I can, on the one hand, be doing the development side of services for the elderly from the Asian community particularly, but also I could act as a catalyst to the statutory services, prod them, stab them in the back, whatever, keep nagging at them to say, ‘come on, you’ve got to change, we are here in a multicultural society and you have got to develop services that are relevant to the needs of other people whose religions, cultures, may be different.’ AB
I asked Anil how the Centre came to develop specific services for the elderly;

‘We had done research in my previous organisation, AFFOR [All Faiths for One Race], into the needs of black and ethnic minority elderly and it showed a deficit of services which needed to be developed and part of the remit for the funding from social services was to provide frontline help to elderly people who come and use our services at the centre, but also to develop and to act as a catalyst for change. We had some horrendous battles in those years, but credit where credit is due, we’ve stuck to our guns and we have criticised social services over the years for their lack of initiatives and things like that and yet they have still continued to fund the project because they see the benefits of criticism. I think we have criticised them justifiably and they have changed things over the years and part of that lead to further money from social services that lead to much more outreach work.’ AB

The work with elders is a good example of creating an alternative service in order to change the practice of statutory bodies. ARC identified an area of need that was springing up around the country and developed a model for meeting this need. This was only possible due to the independence of the Centre – the debate within statutory services was not able to instigate the same level of change

across provision for the elderly. This method of critical engagement must be seen as one of ARC's great successes.

'There were many people who used the centre already and who were seeking accommodation in old age for the first time on their own, away from their extended families and so forth, and that's how we picked all the tenants who wanted to go into these schemes. Once those schemes and projects were developed, they were a kind of role model for the people to come. In the first couple of years we were visited by so many local authorities and housing associations to develop a good practice to develop those schemes. Now we have a situation in Birmingham where there are so many sheltered housing schemes for Asian elderly, now instead of moving for housing need an elderly person can move just because they know another person there who is a friend.' AB

Uprisings and the voluntary sector

For many people in Britain, the name 'Handsworth' still calls up images of burning cars and buildings, of bricks and petrol bombs and running battles in the streets. The uprisings in British cities in 1985 marked a sea-change in the political consciousness and confidence of black communities in Britain – and also created a fresh set of challenges for the black voluntary sector. The Barrow Cadbury Trust was one of the funding bodies that recognised the scale of these challenges.

'When the riot came, it was a shock but not a surprise. The message of the disturbances was as confused as the events themselves, but the theme which the Trustees chose to address in their aftermath was that sense of exclusion from the public body politic which compounded furious protest and destructive criminal activity. … The obstacles to full participation by black people rest with institutions controlled by white people: and changing these means that the Trustees must look to themselves and the networks within which they operate.' (Report for the year 1992-1993, quoting from 1985-6 Report, p15)

Muhammad Idrish and Anil Bhalla told me the story that shows the impact of the events of 1985 on the Centre and on the black voluntary sector as a whole.

'We were all there on the day, at about half past three it started hotting up, on that corner over there where Aldi [local supermarket] is. Baljinder got off the bus and said 'things are looking bad today – I think something will happen today' and it did happen that night. The following day we came to work … we thought black people have got a grievance against the police, they are fighting the police,

so, nothing to worry about, we got on with the work and that was the day's work and we did it until two o'clock in the afternoon. At about 11 o'clock, Douglas Hurd the Home Minister came with lots of police vans and his ministerial car, it stopped just past HAMAC [local community housing organisation]. I think he wanted to come out. At that time a large number of black lads had gathered and I could see from a distance some people had some big sticks and were trying to hit him, all shouting, 'go on, give him a bang on the head, what does he think he is doing here at this time?' He was driven away, he was very quickly out into one of the police vans and was driven away, gone. That's that.' MI

'We as an organisation have always kept our links with the community and at a grassroots level. The example I can give for that is during the riots our old building at 101 Villa road had the largest huge plate glass and it was the only building in the whole of Villa Road and Lozells Road that had none of its windows smashed and I think that spoke volumes, that people who were alienated, who had a grudge against the state and what the establishment stood for and yet they understood that here was an organisation which was part of it and was willing to fight and be part of the community' AB

'The following day the headlines suddenly started changing all over the newspapers that it is a fight between the Asians and the Blacks, because these two Asian people got killed in the post office. Many headlines followed from there 'Ten different reasons why Asians hate Caribbeans', 'Ten different reasons why Caribbeans hate Asians', there used to be a running headline in the Sun newspaper. From the second day the whole thing in the newspapers was between Africans and Asians – so much so that we even organised a wreathe-laying ceremony for Africans and Asians to hold a wreathe

to hold outside the post office so that the television picture can go.' MI

'About three days later, we had this telephone call from Douglas Hurd's office. I thought it was a joke, someone is making a joke. Wanting to come and visit the Asian Resource Centre to reassure the Asian community that their life and property will be protected. I literally said 'You mean Douglas Hurd the Home Minister?' and he said 'yes, the Home Office in London'. I thought well what do I do now? So I said, I have a management committee, they have to decide, I cannot do anything. They said 'It is very urgent, he wants to come tomorrow, and could you keep it very secret. This news should not go out'. Most of the staff said 'No, we don't want him here, if we have him here the Caribbean people will think we are siding with the government. So we say no, no.' I said 'Look, it's a serious matter and I don't want to take the blame for it if some people are unhappy about it, why don't we call a management committee meeting?' So we did, we rang round and called a management committee meeting and rectified the decision. Although there were people on the management committee who wanted Douglas Hurd to come, they said 'we can talk about anti-deportation campaigns and all sorts of other things', but the majority of the people said 'No, we don't want it'. MI

'Three or four months later, they had identified that the Villa Cross pub was at the nerve centre of it, so the Council made an application to court and took the licensing from that pub. So when the licence was taken the brewery says, what are we going to do with it? So the Council actually bought it from the brewery and they rang us, not to ask whether we want a building, but to tell us that we should actually move our Asian Resource Centre into that building. Anil took that call and he said 'what do you think?' and I said 'No man,

it's the same thing. You think you are safe in going over there, that's a black people's pub, you go there and put 'Asian Resource Centre', there will be fire bombs coming through every window. Say no. I said this is getting like a joke – we had the Home Office phoning us and now the Council telling us - could you put that in writing? This time put it in writing – not only that we don't want it, but that we positively think that it should remain a black institution in whatever shape or form and we are quite happy to help the Council to identify viable black organisations and look into development process, if they need our help, we'll do that, but we will never own that building and never take that. And they went away and they did [keep the Villa Cross as a black institution].' MI

'That was a very very important political decision taken at that time … in the eyes of the institutions like City Council and Home Office, they accepted that we really are independent.' MI

Campaigning

Throughout its existence, ARC has been involved in various campaigning activity – both in its formal work and through contact with independent campaigns that met in the ARC building. A number of the independent campaigns received funds from Barrow Cadbury Fund Limited – something that Anthony Wilson describes as a 'precious separate source of funds' – because funds from this source allowed campaigning and fitted with Trust's conception of social justice.

Everyone interviewed felt that the campaigning activity that was associated with the Centre was an important part of ARC's profile and reputation. Some key people had been drawn into the formal business of the Centre through an initial contact with campaigns. The existence of the ARC allowed campaigning and political skills to be shared.

'I think it was a very good centre in that it was a central place and they kept the communication lines open – that all seems to have continued. They also provided a venue and they also provided know-how with practical things such as producing leaflets and that sort of thing. That's quite an important thing for small groups or campaigns. The other bit is that there was a core group, a few people who would always be around, who knew something about things and who had always been involved. Passing on skills and things is quite important. And they had regular meetings and that was quite good as well. I think it is difficult to maintain that on a very non-specific level but when there were quite a lot of campaigns and things there was a need for regular meetings. .. you start developing links with other people through that.' KJ

Others felt that the campaigning element was an essential part of the work of the Centre,

‘The mistake we made during that time is that we didn’t keep the debate in the forefront in our own communities and we didn’t keep the informed debate going in the wider community, partly because I feel there was a time when the ARC became a little introverted and it couldn’t afford to do that because there were so many other people jumping on the bandwagon.’ AnB

Campaigns were a way of keeping the wider work of the Centre in the forefront of people’s minds. Although the campaigns had a separate and independent life from the formal funded work of the Centre, campaign activity has increased the credibility and visibility of the ARC. For many of the people who I interviewed, there was no clear distinction between where welfare work ended and political work began.

‘Don’t forget that most of the anti-deportation work was actually only built up on the immigration work that the centre did – so there was a genuine flow, it was organic. It wasn’t as if those two things were separate, they were part and parcel of the same thing. You do your immigration work on a Wednesday evening and then from that if there were cases that came out of it, then you developed those.’ SG

‘We had lots of meetings on that, that this anti-deportation work is not the work of the Centre, this is us when we are not working at the Centre. Trying to clarify to people that it is a different dimension to the work’. SG

‘From the provision that you make available and from your involvement within that arises political issues. Political issues don’t arise from nowhere. … In 1983 or 4 there was a particular rule within social security, Soho Road were particularly bad … sometimes when a woman’s husband would go on extended leave or something her social security would be cut. … a woman was left to fend for herself and her relatives would have to support her. Now Soho Road were particularly bad at doing that, so we had loads of cases where case after case, women would come and say, my husband’s gone and they won’t give me any money. They said ‘go and ask your brother or father or something’. So what we did was we talked to a number of women and said ‘look, this seems to be happening much more at Soho Road’. There were various ways we could have tackled it, but given the particular style, we used the only one that we knew how. So we got a few women together, we had consulted the social security office to say this was going on and what were they going to do about it and nothing was done about it and in the end we just went and picketed them. Because this is the only way that attention is drawn to this subject. And hey presto, seven or eight weeks later the rule was changed or the practices were changed. So that was a welfare issue, but political mobilisation happened through it’. SG

It is important to recognise that the Centre provided a venue for community politics – often single-issue campaigns or support campaigns around individuals and families facing deportation or fighting miscarriages of justice. Party politics was not welcome and was seen to damage the credibility and independence of the organisation.

‘The other thing was that when we talk about political action, we weren’t party politics. You know, we weren’t standing for elections,

we were just free beings who were against the state for doing what it was doing. … none of the workers there were ever affiliated to any political party and never mobilised on the basis of that. We weren't involved in mainstream politics and we didn't like people who were, because that was not the way we thought. To us all the main political parties didn't actually represent the interests of not just black people but most poor people. I remember actually, do you remember Councillor X – he wasn't a councillor then – and he came to ARC and he said I want to volunteer and he did, but he didn't actually say why. My co-workers were quite astute like that, and very quickly they worked out that this man was trying to pick up votes and his voluntary work was rejected. So I think we had a clear line on that in that respect'. SG

Working Across Communities and Community Cohesion

In the 1970s, the Barrow Cadbury Trust was already funding African-Caribbean projects in the Handsworth area. However, it was more difficult to build relationships with suitable Asian organisations.

'We never got as involved on the Asian voluntary organisation side, because they would so often be religion based - mosque, gurdwara, temple - which firstly meant that they were far more self-sufficient anyway. They would very rarely come to a trust for funds and secondly the model that the trust worked to actually made it more difficult to support a religious-based organisation than a secular one. We would quite often find ourselves supporting church groups and we would always make the notional distinction between the service that was provided to the local community as a whole from the pastoral care of its members and any proselytising that might be going on. We would be concerned for the services to local people.' AW

Barrow Cadbury funded two secular Asian groups during this time – the Asian Resource Centre and the Shaheed Udham Singh Centre run by the Indian Workers' Association. The lack of explicitly secular Asian projects made it difficult for Asian groups to develop funding relationships and working relationships with a range of organisations. The ARC was formed on a basis of unity across Asian communities and this allowed the Centre to welcome a variety of people and partners into its work. Various people spoke of the attractions of the Centre.

'One of the reasons I left Barnardos is the charm of coming to the ARC, because I was familiar with the ARC before I came here.

Within social work circles, in the Left circles in Birmingham, Asian Resource Centre was quite well known. Although it was only six, seven years old at that time, many people like me also had this pull to come and work for the ARC. I suppose the first attraction was you work in an environment where all your colleagues are Asian, all your clients are Asian, and go out of the centre, everybody around here is Asian. So to be able, in England, to work with people who look like you, who talk like you, work for people who are like you as well, that was a great attraction.' MI

However, despite the desire to unite all Asian communities, there was not always equal representation of all communities.

'This was still the time when not many Pakistani and Bengali households had their families here, they were mainly men, not many women. Women's problems and children's problems were mainly manifesting within the Indian community. The ARC in those days was, I found out to my surprise, an Indian centre. When I started I was the only Bengali person and I was the only Muslim person in the centre – I was the sixth member of staff'. MI

This situation was mirrored in the management committee.

'When I was on the management committee, apart from Aijaz, there was no Pakistani worker or Kashmiri worker. In every single management committee meeting I was arguing that 'it doesn't look good'. Even some people, old people, they wanted to go to the centre with DSS problem or any problem, they used to say 'we are going to that Indian centre'. I said 'this is the bad name – you must do something'. … Even before that, when Idrish job came up, I fought very hard for Idrish. And even in management committee interviewing panel, they all went against this candidate (Idrish). I

walked out. It was in some people's mind that he was facing deportation. I said 'this is not our problem. This is an immigration problem. We want to just employ a person that is suitable for the job and this is a later problem that may hopefully be solved. I walked out and I came down and had a word with the rest of the staff. And thanks to the staff, they backed me and they said if they give a job to the other person, we are not going to co-operate with them. They knew Idrish because of his campaign'. GN

Although the Asian Resource Centre has worked with all sections of the community since its inception and provides for the representation of all the South Asian communities, this balance has come through an ongoing process of negotiation.

'It dawned on me that this was an Indian centre, rather than an Asian Resource centre. When I jokingly said that, people were feeling quite defensive and uncomfortable about it. I was surprised by the level of defensiveness other workers were showing. I essentially thought it is obvious, there are more Indian people capable of doing this kind of job, therefore they have more Indian workers – but they were very defensive about it. I then realised that the management committee had the same picture – there were one or two hand-picked selected people who were asked to come and be a management committee member. The management committee also consisted ninety per cent, ninety-five per cent Indian people'. MI

The imbalance between the representation of different Asian communities was addressed only through concerted effort and debate. Different people have been encouraged to join the management committee at different times – depending on the needs of the time. The Centre has taken an active decision to target and develop workers from under-represented communities. As a result,

there are now a number of staff from Bangladeshi and Mirpuri backgrounds on the staff.

Despite its deep involvement in black politics, the Asian Resource Centre was created to meet the particular needs of Asian communities. I asked whether this represented a threat to unity between Asian and African-Caribbean communities.

'It was not in our minds to divide black communities, it was to deal with the complexity of black communities, recognising very early on that there are cultural aspects to our lives as well as the political aspects. Talking politically, coming together on the ticket of a common blackness became absolutely understandable. When we talked about service delivery at a cultural level, discrimination at a cultural level, then it was right for us to see how African-Caribbeans might be discriminated against in a different way to how Asians might be discriminated against, whether it was the police, whether it was hospitals giving service delivery, the courts and so on. So ethnicity then replaced 'race' as a basis for grouping, but never with the idea that we should remain separate'. RS

From its inception, the Centre has argued that culturally specific services do not constitute a form of self-segregation. The point was to enable Asian people to play their full role in society.
'It was about getting people a confidence, an ethnic pride if you like, but not so that it became an ethnicist situation - but where they felt comfortable, secure and fulfilled so that they could enter into wider politics, so that the nature of their involvement was that much more effective. There were also intra-cultural aspects that we were dealing with at the time, but they were not the significant ones. We were not spending all our time saying to Asians you must do this with the African-Caribbean community – that was not the issue. The issue

was how confident are you of living in this society and of operating with others that are equally discriminated against and sometimes more so and how can you come together on some points and how can you argue for separate provision at others?' RS

The Asian Resource Centre is one of the few projects in Birmingham that cuts across the boundaries within the Asian community. This vision of Asian unity has informed the Centre throughout its existence – focusing on people's needs has created a space where all sections of the Asian community are able to come for help.

'Advice and assistance offered by the Centre have successfully transcended existing intra-racial differences and broken through restrictions imposed by religion, caste and sex. In the last two years it has been frequented by numbers of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians; men and women; old, middle-aged and young; Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis; Asians from the sub-continent and those from East Africa – regardless of caste considerations and political leanings'. (Progress Report 1979, p6)

Of course, the rhetoric of unity is easy. The practice of creating a safe space for all is harder to achieve. However, some spoke of a more relaxed counter to communalism that comes from everyday interactions without the pressure of political agendas.

'It was so nice to see, even in the time when I call it the Indian resource centre, even in those days you used to have Punjabis, Kashmiris and Bengalis sitting side by side. I was quite heartened to see Punjabi men reading the Urdu newspaper. I used to think, how did that happen, and they used to say, well in Punjab we do read Urdu, which I did not know. As far as my concept was concerned,

there was a big riot in Punjab, Muslims killed Sikhs, Sikhs killed Muslims, but here Sikhs were reading Urdu newspapers. It's not all lost, what I heard, people do get on. And Bengalis speaking to Pakistanis, a great mix, as if the Pakistan movement, the Bangladesh movement and the India movement have not taken place. This was a space in which ordinary people could choose to make friends in the way they chose to, rather than being dictated to by the politicians and political forces'. MI

Others suggested that older Asian people retained habits of mutual tolerance and co-existence, so that being in Britain made the national boundaries of the sub-continent less important.

'I think one of the great things about working with the elderly is that they don't see themselves as Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and so forth. They see themselves as a generic South Asian community and I think they transport their skills and experiences from the pre-Independence days across and it works very well. They support each other, they work with each other, they respect each others religions and customs'. AB

Everyone interviewed agreed that we are going through a period when the divisive forces of communalism are re-emerging, both in Britain and back home. Although this was recognised to be a threat to ARC and the organisation's methods of work, there was an agreement that this threat made it more important than ever to maintain a space where different Asian communities could meet and work together.

'The splits and things have a basis and that needs to be recognised, because there are tensions, no doubt about it, between different communities, needs are different, because we are at different levels

of integration, different levels of usage, etc. So I think by denying tensions, which is what I would have done when I was younger, that is not really going to solve the problem. But I still think the aim should be to develop an umbrella organisation …I think we need to develop the strengths within the community and recognise the differences'. KJ

A double danger was identified – that there is division and fragmentation between Asians and that the barriers between Asian and white communities are growing. Community-based organisations must develop methods of meeting both of these challenges.

'One of the areas that depresses me most is that we are still so isolated and that isolation used to be an 'us' and 'them' situation but it's also happening 'us' and 'us' within our own communities and I think that is so sad because there was a time, even when the Resource Centre was separate, we worked with white organisations, we worked with African-Caribbean organisations, we worked with anyone who wanted to engage and the more fragmented and inward-looking we have got the worse it's got. So my hope for the ARC is that it manages to stay true to what it was meant to be first – no caste, no colour, no barriers, no religion to be brought into our work. We are there as the *Asian* resource centre with open doors to everybody because I think if an organisation like the ARC can't hold that together there is very little hope for anyone else doing it'. AnB

It is important to remember that it is the Centre's long history of engaging in anti-racist campaigning that gives people confidence that the organisation can find ways to combat other forms of exclusion. The ARC was one of organisations that opened the

debate about institutional racism in service delivery in this city – that legacy means that a lot of people have some trust in the organisation.

‘I suddenly realised that it is ten years since Stephen Lawrence was murdered and time seems to go really fast. That’s been a national consciousness, a key change in attitude, but before that it wasn’t as common to even talk about racism, let alone recognising that it may be happening in your own workplace whether you are a professional or not … So although now it seems that we can openly talk about racism, institutional racism, personal racism, I don’t think it was that open or that accepted then, so I think there was a need’. KJ

Developing the organisation

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Centre has been its ability to survive, during years when many other black projects have folded. I asked people how the Centre had built its reputation and maintained its support. One factor was the ability of the organisation to attract interesting and dynamic individuals.

'My initial contact with ARC is indirectly really, because the person whose house we lodged in was one of the workers at ARC. So although I didn't know anything about ARC, I had seen it in work and that was quite impressive because it used to be always completely full and there seemed to be a lot of enthusiasm among the workers'. KJ

The reputation of the Centre was not established through professional qualifications. Ghulam Nabi, who became the Centre's co-ordinator in 1985, explained that he became a community worker through his voluntary and political work.

'What we do in the centre is in aid of the community, and we had been doing that before as well. Even joining the centre, joining the management committee, was because of our community. There is an organisation, Kashmiri workers association, I was the founding member of that organisation and that was helping people whenever we got time. Going to the social security, going to the housing problems, wherever, going to the police if there was a problem or something, filling in forms and this and that. Even sometimes there was a difficult to understand immigration case – if we could not understand, by we I mean people from Kashmiri organisations, we used to take people to other people who were very expert about the cases … by going with people to see them, we came to know of

these problems and we learned something, without going to any office work or any centres. That was some sort of experience that we gained from our local communities, from serving the community'. GN

Without this space to recognise and value voluntary work experience, it is unlikely that the ARC would have been in a position to appoint workers who represented all sections of the Asian community. The Centre has developed through a period in which community-based organisations have undergone great changes, and there is an increasing expectation that community workers will follow similar professional and qualification routes to their counterparts in the statutory services. The Centre has responded to these pressures by trying to maintain its commitment to developing individuals while also creating more professional processes and structures for the work of the organisation.

Muhammad Idrish, co-ordinator of the Centre since 1992, views this development of processes as an essential aspect of the organisation's survival. He describes his appointment as community worker as an example of the dangers of running community organisations without clear management processes.

'The first month I did not have any salary – I asked 'what happened to my salary?' and I was told that 'oh, you have to wait because the grant money has not come in.' So I waited a week – you know, I was only getting six thousand pounds, I didn't have great big savings – so the next week I asked again. I was told that the grant had still not come in, so I started to get a bit worried 'where is it coming from and who is supposed to bring it?' I was told it is coming from Cadbury's, everything is in hand. After the third week I could not wait, so I said 'do you mind if I ring Cadbury's?' So I

literally rang Cadbury's, because I thought, God, if there is no money, and it was the peak time of my anti-deportation campaign, then I will be unemployed. I got through to Anthony Wilson who was a very nice person and he told me 'you haven't got any money, because you haven't applied for it'. … I rang Anthony Wilson again and I said 'look I have never done a funding application, do you mind if I give it a go?' Actually I literally asked him what to write and he was kind enough to tell me this type of thing. When he received it I think he realised that something has gone wrong in it, he said 'the application is fine Muhammad, we will release half of the money and I will come to meet with you to improve the application.' I have the copy of that application somewhere – I would not give any money with that application'. MI

As the Centre grows and carries on, there is a need to develop more formalised ways of working. Although the spontaneity of earlier community activism appears attractively romantic, sustaining an organisation over time requires an attention to more mundane details.

'The high idealistic platform that you have got with people talking about the beginning of the centre, that is fantastic, but that would have gone. … People are not going to breathe air and do all those things if they cannot get their bread and butter. There is no job security, nobody knows where the money is coming from, X was still doing funding applications. I said 'why is a white man doing our funding applications? If our mission statement says we should be proud of ourselves and reassert our cultural identity, I find it offensive that the Asian Resource Centre's funding applications should be done by a white man. Just when I got the half of Cadbury's grant, I started feeling a bit assertive. It took me more than a year to find out what are the sources of our funding and

nobody was telling me. Every time I asked people drew this boundary around them'. MI

Idrish argued that this shift was necessary for the Centre to keep running – and that this was the lesson that had to be learned by ARC staff.

'If we don't learn, we will not last. From the very beginning I kept saying 'I came from social work, I came from Barnardo's and I can probably go back and get a job … but unless we learn, this is a fantastic place, let us learn what it needs to run the place rather than just running the service. People were quite happy to leave it as it is, not only that people did not know how to raise their funds, they did not know how to manage'. MI

Equally, there was little formal process in the records of the management committee or in the general management of the project. In order to maintain the Centre's ethos of ethnic pride and self-sufficiency, it was necessary to develop the capabilities of workers and plan the development of the project as a whole.

'I put the first ten years of management committee minutes in half a folder … nobody was, not acting as a manager, or fulfilling a managerial role. Even if you do it as a group, you identify the tasks and you do it. In terms of advice as well, you know people were not doing advice work, people were simply interpreting for advisers. Most of the advice work was done by solicitors, by white advisers, … what really hurt my pride is that to these people I am an interpreter not the advice worker. If at that time I was not facing deportation and the centre was not such a political place, and at that time it was, I would have probably left because I could not see me being an interpreter to a so-called expert'. MI

This sense that greater formal organisation would allow better and more effective work was echoed by former members of the management committee,

‘One of the AGMs I got elected onto the management committee and I would say that I don’t think that I was really suitable because I was working quite long hours full-time and I think in some ways that wasn’t very clear, how much work will be involved. I don’t know if that has been sorted out subsequently, but it certainly wasn’t, how much work will be involved, especially if disputes and things occur, how would you resolve them? And none of us had any training or anything, none of us also had any agreement. I don’t think you necessarily need training if there was some kind of agreement that this is what would be done. I don’t think anything like that was ever clear’. KJ

These issues about the role and processes of the management committee continue to present challenges for the voluntary sector. Kalpana Joshi, a former member of the ARC management committee, felt that organisations must develop methods of addressing and resolving conflicts and problems.

‘There has to be some other way of having avenues open if things are not working, they should feel relaxed enough to say ‘there are problems – we don’t know how it is all going to develop’. Interviewer: There is a need for communication between management committee and staff? ‘Yes and there isn’t really any formal way of doing that. Because in the past, most of us knew each other and that would be fine, but as it gets bigger and bigger, you don’t know people and you can’t go by people’s past whatever or reputation, you are just going by what happens on the day. That trust

needs to be developed in some way, you can't just assume it will carry on.' KJ

As the organisation grows and there is less day-to-day interaction between staff and management committee, formal processes take on a greater importance. This is a challenge facing a number of smaller voluntary sector organisations – and has been an issue that has contributed to the demise of some other organisations. Muhammad Idrish felt that this showed the need to balance campaigning objectives with effective organisational structures. ARC has survived because it represents a rare combination of political vision and well-managed practices.

'They [law centres] didn't manage things very well, so they have gone more or less, whereas Citizen's Advice Bureau don't have any political backbone but at least they manage people's files better and they have remained. We probably fall in the middle somewhere. Well it's only a one-off thing isn't it, it's not many of us, it's a one-off centre sticking out, you do it, nobody else does it, there's no example of it. It is probably [due to] a combination of individuals and the place that is has survived, otherwise that high moral ground of the early days could not be sustained as a mass movement. I don't think it would even have survived as one unit, a one-off example'. MI

Idrish described the development of more formal work practices and the benefits these have brought to the Centre's work;

'I think my work with Barnardo's helped me because there we used to have weekly staff meetings, a diary, we used to have a message book, simple things like that. The Centre had been there for ten years, twelve years by that time, and they didn't simply have a

message book, a diary, a meeting book and staff meetings. If you look at our staff meeting minutes, they started happening only in 1986 and then in the first few months I could not get anybody. I used to argue with people that this is part of the job and we must attend staff meetings, because that is [part of the] job. Going to meetings and giving advice is not the only thing we need to do, we need to sit down and organise our work and share our experience and if you are angry with me that will be the place to say. We don't have a boss, we are working as a co-operative, so the staff meeting can open people up, people can say things. We finish on Friday and get everything out of our system, on Monday you come to work in a better place'. MI

For the ARC, the volume of work and personnel involved pushed the organisation towards more formalised practices. However, in more recent years, funding agencies have demanded that voluntary sector organisations demonstrate their ability to conform to certain models of good practice. Earlier developments have left the ARC relatively well-prepared for these new hurdles.

'It was actually the late nineties when the real pinch of all the funders wanting more from you came in. Now, on the one hand, some of the funders genuinely wanted voluntary sector organisations like ours to be better organised. Some funders wanted it as a stick 'either do it or we will cut your grant'. With other funders I was not worried, but with Birmingham City Council, because the decisions there are taken by politicians, I was getting worried. I thought not only do we have to do it, even if we do it, they may still cut our grant, because in the real world, in the political scenario, politicians by nature don't want other people to be more popular than them'.
MI

The Work and Ethos of the Asian Resource Centre

The Asian Resource Centre is a community centre, based in the Handsworth district of the city of Birmingham, which serves the needs of the Asian community in the relevant languages with a deep understanding of the religious and cultural aspirations of the people it serves. The services are provided through advice work at the Centre, running appropriate projects like the Asian Elders, Women's Welfare Rights, Housing, Welfare, and by providing resources and practical help, through a coherent policy of anti-racism and anti-sexism. The Centre produces leaflets, pamphlets in Asian languages and acts as a pressure group to statutory agencies. It provides educational and training facilities for the local community, voluntary and statutory agencies. The Centre is staffed by Asian workers and managed by elected representatives of the Asian community. The Centre has been functioning continuously since it opened in 1977.

The objectives of the Centre are:

- To identify and analyse the cultural and social system placed upon particularly disadvantaged sections of the Asian community within the neighbourhood and elsewhere;

- To initiate, participate and assist in projects designed to protect their civil and human rights, to encourage freedom of cultural expression and to promote a strong sense of pride.

The principles of the Centre:

- To provide free, prompt, efficient and specialist advice and information as a service for all members of the Asian community in the area;

- To provide a focal point, where all members of the Asian community, men and women of all ages, regardless of religious and cultural differences, can come together over issues of common concern;

- To combat racism and fascism in all their manifestations;

- To encourage all Asians to reassert their cultural identity, self-confidence and pride.

Campaigning groups that have used the ARC premises over the years include:

Asian Youth Movement
Iqbal Begum Campaign
Muhammad Idrish Anti-Deportation Campaign
Baba Bakhtaura Anti-Deportation Campaign
Toufique Ahmed Anti-Deportation Campaign
Black Women's Right to Benefit Campaign
Metso Moncrieffe Anti-Deportation Campaign
Prakash and Prem Anti-Deportation Campaign
Hemlata Patel Anti-Deportation Campaign
Audrey Grant Anti-Deportation Campaign
Free Satpal Ram Campaign
West Midlands Anti-Deportation Campaign
National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns

Political context and new forms of funding

During its existence the ARC has survived different and changing views from central government, from Birmingham City Council and from funding bodies. Everybody I spoke to felt strongly that the political independence of the Centre had helped it to continue its work.

'Over the years lots of people have tried [to take over the ARC], from all sections of the South Asian communities, both from the political side to the do-gooders who work in the statutory sector who want to swallow the ARC up and make it their flagship. I think the reason we have stayed clear from that is that we had a staff team who didn't see themselves as wanting aspirations for themselves. They were more involved in the community. They lived in, worked in and were part of the community, and therefore wanted to keep that ethos going, keeping the organisation in the community. Part of that fight was really to keep it there, to say to politicians 'sorry we are not going to do this for you, we are not going to take sides and support you. You'll have to find another avenue. This is a community organisation here to provide frontline services to the community and its going to keep its grassroots image of serving all sections of the community, regardless'.' AB

However, closeness to the community is not the only factor that has allowed the ARC to maintain its independence. The guarantee of some continued funding from Barrow Cadbury, a source that was sympathetic to the aims and methods of the Centre, provided a buffer against the shifts and uncertainties of more mainstream funding. Anthony Wilson explained why Barrow Cadbury felt that this continuity was important.

‘[We] do this because paying the rent and having secretaries that get paid is what was needed to survive. One can have the sexy high-profile bits that other people may want to fund and claim virtue – but really matters is getting in at the basic basic core funding for survival’. AW

Barrow Cadbury have maintained their funding of the ARC through the twenty-five years since it started.

‘There weren’t many groups that we kept up with for as long as that – but that’s because the group kept going and kept on doing good work and went on being able to make good use of the kind of money that we could provide. We never took the line that there was some kind of magic in three-year funding and then you cut off. If a group was doing work that the Trust wanted to see done and was doing it well and needed support, we stayed there. … I think the fact that they had reasonably secure funding from one source at least and secure premises makes a big difference – so let’s not underestimate that. But it went on attracting people who worked there in a range of capacities. It is astonishing where people who have been associated with ARC are working now – all over the place – so it clearly attracted people of great ability and gave them some very challenging and satisfying roles and they took that with them when their abilities took them further afield.’ AW

This ability to create a network of ambassadors for the work of the Centre has been an important factor in the promotion of the organisation. Many people in key agencies in the West Midlands have had some working relationship with the ARC – and this has allowed the ARC to build links and friendships in some unlikely places. A significant number of so-called ‘Asian professionals’ in the region have benefited from their contact with the ARC. In part,

this network was built as a response to the threat posed by the New Right policies of the Thatcher government.

‘That was the time when the Tories and Margaret Thatcher’s philosophy started hitting the street. Before that at the time when the centre started politically it was a different scenario all over the country. We still used to have a Labour government in power, trade union disputes, demonstrations, and Labour was controlling Birmingham West Midlands County Council. If you could create an ideological platform with a little bit of service, you could get money. There were literally no questions asked. …

… From ‘79 to ‘85 people ignored Margaret Thatcher – they thought she is there and she is going to go and we will come back. I think it was about the second term of Margaret Thatcher that it started clicking on to people - the second term she actually won with an even bigger majority. You know, what we call Margaret Thatcher’s children started coming into positions of making decisions, because up until that it was the old Tories and old Labour. In our patch we were pretty safe, we were all old Labour. So I think that is the change – new council officers started coming and saying ‘right, do a bit more about the audit’, we will ask the ARC to fill in a few more forms’. MI

The high unemployment and economic recession of the Thatcher years hit black communities particularly hard. For Asian people in the West Midlands, unemployment devastated the whole community.

‘In the mid-eighties these family problems were starting, because people were losing jobs and families were growing up … our people wherever they worked it was linked with the car industry, all of

those factories and foundries were linked with the car industry and it went really down sometime because of this new high-tech machinery and everything. Also people were working closer to inner-city areas and wherever they were they were in larger numbers. Quite a few factories and foundries, our people were the majority of workers … and those were the hardest hit by the unemployment … All of a sudden a big load of work came to the Centre, because the family was growing up and people were getting unemployed and it is not only the men who were clients, because when they were getting unemployed always it creates some problem in the family, and then the women were coming as well.' GN

The loss of men's jobs had an impact on women and families and the Centre found itself dealing with this increase in problems and queries. At the same time, the lack of jobs for younger black people brought a new group into the work of the Centre.

'A lot of my friends had returned post-university from other cities or in my case another continent to come back to our home city and we were all unemployed graduates. For various reasons we just ended up having contact with ARC. For me, it was, in effect, initially as a client – because I went in there to ask how I might claim my unemployment benefit now that I was destined for the dole queue after university. … Almost monthly new members of my peer group were returning from university, because every year there would be a new crop of unemployed black graduates which sadly hasn't changed. Most of the black graduates I see still remain unemployed. But some of us managed to find alternative careers out of it'. BB

During this period of economic restructuring and intensive political battles, the ARC served as a home for a variety of dissenting voices – both providing essential services for a community being forced to

adapt to the consequences of long-term unemployment and making space for other kinds of political thought and discussion.

‘The beauty of ARC was that as an institution it was flexible enough to have from the most liberal to the most rabidly Marxist – so it was a broader church than the Labour party has ever been.
We had suggested that part of the state’s race policies in the early to late eighties was the ethnicisation of communities … they were trying to divide the word ‘black’. BB

This critique of state racism and attempts to divide Asian and African-Caribbean communities into ever smaller and more isolated units has continued to inform the development of ARC. When the Centre has entered into competition for new sources of funding or developed new procedures for working, it has continued to work with other projects in order to build a strong and independent black voluntary sector that can meet the needs of all black communities. The insight that there are shared political interests that can unite different black communities adds to the desire to maintain a political independence for the sector. After all, who will help us if we can’t help ourselves?

‘I just don’t have very many nice things to say about solicitors, I think they just earn money without really earning it. Some of them, only some of them, really do want to fight for their clients, the majority of them earn their money because they are solicitors. In the mid nineties the sound started coming out that the government is going to do something about the legal aid system and they might open it up to non-solicitors. In ‘94, ‘95, it became obvious that this was what they were going to do … [after reading the information] I realised that it will not be so difficult for us to do and if we can get this money and get all these processes [in place] it will be difficult

for one funder to control us or to cut our money, and even if they do we will not fold. …

… Getting into legal aid funding, I thought, can solve many problems in one go – one, you are not in the pocket of the councillors, it is a better spread of your funding which always makes you slightly more powerful than to obey your funders all the time'. MI

The success of the application to be part of the Legal Aid Franchise has given the ARC a level of stability that enhances the work of the whole organisation. This funding is not time-limited and is not tied to the vagaries of local politics. With this, and with other new sources of funding, ARC has sought to share its knowledge with other black projects in the city. A story about the introduction of Lottery grants shows this process;

'Lottery funding, that was another one of the new [sources of] funding. I [had] convinced myself that there are going to be more Asian councillors and there are going to be more problems for our funding, so you are better off going and getting money from somewhere else. I just followed them around, the Lottery people, they organised a meeting in BVSC [Birmingham Voluntary Services Committee] and it was in the Evening Mail and I saw there was a meeting, you know, Lottery people coming and giving a talk there. I didn't even think that I needed to be invited, I just went there, only to be stopped at the gate. They said 'there are no seats'. Luckily the meeting was downstairs and I just went in, I almost pushed this white man away, I said 'Look, I will just look through the door to see how many people are there'. I went there and there was literally not another black person in the room and at that time I got really strong and I just pushed the door and I went in. I started shouting at

him ‘so all these white people can hear what you have to say and you don’t have the courtesy to invite a black person. I don’t want a seat, I’ll just stand here – is that alright?’ I loudly said ‘I have not been invited. It looks as if not many black people have been invited. I am quite happy to stand at the back here – is that any problem?’ and they were all ‘No no no – please stay’ and having gone there and found myself in a position, I thought I can use this position even better. When the question and answer session came I started accusing them ‘you deliberately didn’t invite any black people, you don’t want us to get any money. I will organise a meeting for the black voluntary sector in Birmingham – could you give me an undertaking that you will come and talk to them?’ Which they had to do and which I did – luckily 150 organisations were represented in the Council House and they came. I think Birmingham is the only place that has got relatively the same proportion of money for black organisations to white organisations of any other city, because nobody actually went around to do it.’ MI

The ethos of the ARC has allowed the organisation to build relationships of trust with other community projects and to create some space for co-operation between groups.

‘In the black voluntary sector no-one trusts anybody, everybody thinks, wrongly thinks, that the pot of money is fixed and small and they are all fighting for it. You are always my rival – you know, poor people’s thinking. But they don’t go beyond that, they don’t see that there are bigger pots around. For a long time a lot of people who were involved in running other voluntary sector organisations have received help and advice from us in terms of raising money, doing procedures. When the PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations) system came BVSC were giving two thousand pounds to organisations at just about the time when

we had finished doing the office manual for the legal services commission and I don't know how other people think, but once I do something I want other people to share it … anybody who wanted me to help with the office manual or procedures, I just said I will post you my one, you look at it. I told them the honest truth, just change our name, put your name in, fiddle with it here and there and it will be your office manual. I think people appreciate that – you go to so many places and people will say 'it's so difficult', there are even black consultants who will charge you five thousand pounds to do an office manual. I don't see the point, once ARC has done one, no point anyone spending more than a hundred quid on someone reading it and transforming it to their own format. People appreciate that'. MI

Changing shape of voluntary sector

After the emergence of black and other voluntary sector projects through the seventies and eighties, the voluntary sector becomes an ongoing part of the array of service providers. However, black projects are characterised by short life-spans and many projects did not survive.

In this context, the survival of ARC has taken on a greater importance for the black voluntary sector as a whole. This section of the report will analyse the experience of the ARC in order to suggest some ways forward for the sector. This section discusses some recent policy debates and government papers. However, the lessons of the ARC are couched in more everyday and human terms – how do you gain the trust of local people and how do you keep people involved in community organisations?

'A prime reason was the people involved, … I think that is how it works, if you attract one or two unusual characters to a project then other people tend to get attracted to the project who wouldn't have done otherwise. … I think another thing was the very strong principle right from the start that it should involve all the Asian communities and that it shouldn't even leave that to chance, it should actually take very pro-active, positive steps to make sure that all the local Asian communities were equally represented which I think gave it a much firmer base within the community than it might have had.' GW

The voluntary sector has been attempting to respond to a changing policy context and rapidly shifting ideas of the role of this sector and its relation to the statutory services.

The Treasury outline current government thinking about the role of the voluntary sector and its relation to statutory services in the report, 'The role of the voluntary and community sector in service delivery, a cross cutting review'.

This report describes the particular and specialised role of the voluntary and community sector, and outlines some key areas of strength. A number of these match the attributes that are identified as areas of strength and expertise for the ARC. Overall, the Treasury highlights the contribution of the sector, while recognising the need for reform and innovation to enable the most effective services.

'Securing reform will take time, but key principles are clear: services need to be more responsive to customer concerns and they need to be flexible enough to meet the needs of particular communities and groups. This means that there must be more discretion at the local level about how best to deliver services and more community involvement in helping to shape services, against a backdrop of national standards.' (HM Treasury, 4)

This report suggests that there is a need for credible local organisations that have gained the trust of the local community.
Although there is a desire to develop national standards of delivery, there is also a recognition that the most effective services must adapt to local context and concerns.

Centrally to the whole report, there is a recognition that statutory agencies cannot reach all sections of the population effectively and that social inclusion requires the assistance of the voluntary sector.

'Voluntary and community (VCOs), including social enterprises, have a key role to play in this. They grow out of the determination

to provide high quality support to particular groups, are often uniquely placed to reach marginalised groups and enable individuals to participate actively in their local communities.' (HM Treasury, 4)

Recent debates about community cohesion have revealed the continuing need to engage effectively with minority ethnic communities. The Treasury report seems to admit that in relation to such hard-to-reach groups, the voluntary sector is better placed than mainstream service providers and, importantly, will continue to be so. This is an opportunity to take the recommendations of government in order to gain further recognition for the expertise of the ARC. It is unlikely that other organisations will be able to rival its credibility in the area, with both community groups and the statutory agencies.

'Although not always inherently better than other providers VCOs may yet have a *comparative advantage* in relation to other sectors in *certain kinds of policy environments*.' (HM Treasury, 4)

These areas are outlined in the following points:

i. specialist knowledge, experience and/or skills
ii. particular ways of involving people in service delivery whether as users or self-help/autonomous groups
iii. independence from existing and past structures/models of service
iv. access to wider community without institutional baggage
v. freedom and flexibility from institutional pressures

This list echoes much of the practice of the ARC. If anything, the Treasury account of the value of the voluntary sector seems to favour a return to the earlier approach and practices of the ARC.

The need to secure stable funding has tended to limit innovation in the contemporary voluntary sector. There is also a danger that organisations will be seen as too close to the state and/or government-lead initiatives if their work becomes too identified with particular funders or political agendas. This point seems to be acknowledged in the sister document to the above – 'Private Action, Public Benefit: A Review of Charities and the Wider Not-for-profit Sector' produced by the Strategy Unit of the Cabinet Office.

'The sector's independence is vital to its success. But government has an important role to play in setting the framework within which the sector operates. The government wants to support a not-for-profit sector which is modern, dynamic, innovative, accountable, and engages with diverse communities.' (Strategy Unit, Executive Summary)

Instead of the recent caution in relation to campaigning and political challenge that has characterised discussions of the funding of the voluntary sector, this report views campaigning as a key benefit of the not-for-profit sector.

'Charities perform a valuable role in campaigning for social change. The guidelines on campaigning should be revised to encourage charities to play this role to the fullest extent.' (Strategy Unit, Executive Summary)

This political independence is of even greater importance in the current climate of political disengagement and distrust of politicians and state agencies. Being independent in a vocal and visible manner has a number of benefits – it allows the sector to enable change in mainstream organisations and public life; it increases credibility with users and improves the chances of service take-up; it allows

innovation in the development of services. I asked Avtar Singh Jouhl about the problem of political disengagement and distrust of public bodies.

‘it is not that the community is not there to respond, it is the leaders and activists who changed direction … It is the leading lights who got distracted, that’s one reason. The second one is, which is my fault along with my generation’s fault, where we missed the importance of bringing in the second generation and third generation into the activism of community politics and so the sort of commitment of the first generation, with a few exceptions from the second and third, it is not the same there.’ ASJ

It may be the case that ARC should seek to return to its traditions of community campaigning as a method of re-engaging a generation that has not yet become involved in democratic practice.

‘Charities still enjoy higher levels of public trust and confidence than politicians or established political institutions, and are therefore well placed to offer alternative ways of engaging with the public policy debate and the processes of democracy.’ (Strategy Unit, Chapter 4)

There is a concern to register the importance of the relation between service provision and inclusion/engagement – it is not satisfactory or effective to create an endless stream of passive clients. ARC is well-placed to initiate a range of activity that spans the divide between service provision and democratic engagement.

‘Relatively little is known about the complex processes by which policies based on inclusive values such as participation and partnership achieve in practice the full engagement of local

communities and the diverse groups and individuals within them.' (Demos, 5)

Increasingly, this renewal of democratic culture is seen as a central role of the voluntary sector. In addition, the nurturing of an independent voluntary sector is seen as necessary if mainstream agencies are to rebuild relationships of trust with particular communities. This is true across low-income neighbourhoods – ARC must use its reputation in the locality to develop activity in this area.

'For sustainable social inclusion to be achieved, a layer of independent civil society organisations must be nurtured and supported to generate trust and mutual understanding between different social groups across particular local communities. Government cannot achieve this directly, and very often large public-sector providers have difficulty in developing ongoing, responsive and high-trust relationships with citizens, particularly among client groups.' (Demos, 6)

Demos identify three key conditions for success in the voluntary sector: longevity, leadership and leverage. ARC has benefited from all three – a long and unrivalled track record, the credibility that has accrued from the involvement of a series of highly motivated individuals and the ability to encourage change in other organisations.

Every respondent spoke of ARC's ability to fend off the territorial ambitions of local interest groups, whether they be attached to political ambition or particular segments of particular communities – we must not under-estimate how important a factor this has been in the organisation's longevity. Demos also found that individuals

perceived to be motivated by personal or political gain are unlikely to facilitate the building of trust (Demos 19). ARC has benefited from the involvement of local political activists who recognised the value of maintaining a space of co-operation in relation to community services.

'With the ARC it survived 25 years because any political grouping were kept out of the committee. It was not shoving and pushing committee members from one side to the other and so it was a sort of understanding among left-orientated comrades that rather than pushing and shoving with this service, whatever the politics of revisionism or Marxism, it is important to keep it out.

That is one reason, the second one is very important – the service to the community, client trust, … the commitment above all from the people is very much the cause, that it is community support built on community support. Even the funding that ARC receives these days and even before … it is on the power of the community support that the funders give funding to the ARC' ASJ

Issues for the Asian community

Much of ARC's influence has been achieved through its continuing relationships with individuals who have moved on to work in other agencies.

'After that [volunteering] I went on to change again into a member of the management committee and have kept in touch with ARC's development in the two decades since then mainly supporting Idrish and the current staff. I still get lots of individual clients referred to me by ARC'. BB

I was interested in whether people felt that there was still a need for an organisation such as the Asian Resource Centre. Although many felt that the needs of Asian communities had changed, all felt that the ARC continued to play an essential and irreplaceable role as a community organisation. In particular, it was felt that racism continued to be a problem for younger Asian people – perhaps more so in the absence of forums for collective action.

'I am quite aware that the younger generation can face many many acute problems – far more acute than us. Because we could at least get together and say alright we'll carry on fighting, whereas the younger generation thinks on an individual basis. And I think the younger generation ultimately will have to learn from their own kith and kin that, no, this is the way to fight. Of course the fight can be real and howsoever you may think that oh no this issue is not going to hit me, racism is not going to hit me, communalism is not going to hit me – hit it will. There will be some times, some junctures in society, where you have to come to terms that you have to have a collective fight.' MPU

There was also a feeling that mainstream services had not made as much progress as was often assumed.

‘Social problems will always be there for any community, not just the Asian community – so the need for centres like the Resource Centre will be there. There is still the lack of trust and the lack of confidence in local services, local authority services or health services, because they have made so many mistakes in the past, to build that trust up they are not doing enough. They may have the black social workers or the Asian social workers there – but how much can they do, they are a drop in the ocean’. MR

Others felt that there was still a need for free and impartial service in poor communities in particular.

‘I believe it will carry on because the issues will be there and the issues are getting more complicated. To get justice you have to bring bags of money and bags of money are not there for the deprived man, for the poor man, for the ethnic minority man. I think these bodies have a role for the future’. MPU

However, now black voluntary and community groups are operating in a time when the race equality agenda has been subsumed into the need for community cohesion. In response to this, there is a need to recognise the damaging splintering within minority ethnic communities – not only between white and BME communities and neighbourhoods. ARC is in a strong position to build on its track record to enable dialogue and shared work between different Asian communities.

The broad working definition is that a cohesive community is one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods. (LGA, 6)

Earlier pride in Handsworth as a neighbourhood could be reintroduced as a theme in this work. The involvement of different sections of the community is essential. Real cohesion and real change will only happen is this occurs. ARC should review its relation to more recently arrived communities and form relationships that will enable the Centre to act as a focus for cohesion between different groups in the area. Geoff Wilkins suggests that Handsworth has acted as a focal location for community activism across different waves of migration and that the mixed population of the area has enabled co-operation between communities.

'The difference between Handsworth and a lot of other inner-city areas is that it has always been much more mixed – so if you go to Sparkbrook or Sparkhill, they are very much Muslim areas, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and there will be some Hindus and Afro-Caribbeans and so on, whereas Handsworth at least for the last thirty years has always been much more of a mixture than anywhere else in that it has always had all the different Asian communities and a very substantial Afro-Caribbean community and then all the other waves always come to Handsworth. We got lots of Vietnamese

when the Vietnamese arrived, we've got lots of asylum-seekers now and so on and there has always been a strong Irish contingent here so in that sense it has always been much more mixed. Now why that should mean that there should be more activity I don't know except that it made it a more interesting place maybe and a place that people tended to get involved in because it was more interesting.' GW

ARC should seek to build on this history of neighbourhood involvement and capitalise on the accumulated human resources of the Handsworth area. One possible backdrop to this work can be found in the recent Performance and Innovation Unit report 'Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market', which outlines some key themes in recent research in this area. Overall, this report indicates a recognition at the highest levels of government that racial disadvantage continues to be a problem in the UK labour market. However, the report also stresses the need to recognise that different ethnic groups will face different barriers and levels of disadvantage. In particular, the report suggests that Indian and Chinese groups perform at least as well as the White population in education and employment. This is not the case for Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean groups.

In relation to the work of the ARC, the PIU report raises a number of relevant issues. The authors argue that previous initiatives designed to combat ethnic minority disadvantage has been marred by three factors:

a) the assumption that ethnic minority communities can be described as one homogenous group with similar experiences and needs;

b) the tendency to focus on specific causes of under-achievement or disadvantage in isolation, at the expense of an integrated approach that links issues;
c) the failure to recognise the role of the labour market and a concentration on social and civic integration without recognising the importance of economic integration.

The researchers stress the many significant differences between ethnic minority communities – in educational attainment, participation in the labour market and level of income. These findings suggest that there are too many differences between Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities for the term 'South Asian' to be useful. However, the report clarifies this suggestion;

'In general, ethnic minorities, including Indians, do not get the jobs that their qualification levels justify.

There are various reasons for this. In some cases, ethnic minority groups are concentrated in areas of deprivation. These areas contain barriers, such as poor public transport and isolation in areas with high proportions of workless households, that may disproportionately affect ethnic minorities.' (PIU, 10)

While ARC may need to recognise different needs for different Asian communities, there is a danger that this non-communal space will become divided by this debate. The shared experience and need of the neighbourhood should remain an overarching focus for services and alliances with other organisations.

Strategies for the future

Azim Hajee offered a helpful response to my question: 'What are the key issues facing the Asian community today?'

'To what extent it is possible to develop sustainable organisation that is independent. OK it is important to have access to the grants and so on but actually the key issue is how you develop independent organisation and self-activity that isn't reliant on someone pulling the plug on you at some stage' AH

This dilemma has dogged the ARC throughout its history and much of the discussion in this report is about the various battles to retain an independent community space that was free from political interference. In a situation where communities of different ethnicity appear to be distanced and alienated from mainstream politics and agencies, it is more urgent than ever that community organisation should create a space for self-activity. This need is related to the recognition that social inclusion cannot be about service delivery alone. Demos breaks this down into three dimensions of inclusion:

i) access to social goods
ii) empowerment
iii) institutional trust (Demos, 5.C)

As discussed above – ARC has a track record in all three of these areas. Regaining its activist roots would allow the Centre to act as a more effective catalyst for change. Many of the people interviewed stressed that political activity was an essential component for an effective black voluntary sector.

‘In my view it is very important that the issue of racial discrimination is combated constantly – it has not gone away it is still very much with us. Asian and other black peoples are not treated on a par with their white counterparts. Therefore there is a special need for the voluntary sector for Asians, for African-Caribbeans, for the future. Along with that it is very important for our voluntary sector organisations to get involved into campaigning more actively than we are doing now … whereby we become a force to influence the policy-makers at local level, at regional level and at national level. Without doing that, we are doing some good work but in terms of addressing the issues where we can get our services in the mainstream, it will never happen’ ASJ

Some of this work may demand an engagement with problematic concepts of regeneration and empowerment – as exemplified by the ARC’s engagement with new sources of funding. In order to influence wider debates, it is necessary to unpack and critique the ideas that are imposed on poor communities and their access to funds. Capacity building, in particular, has become a joke term in the world of grant applications. However, Demos define the term in the following terms:

- acting collectively to demand change from others, such as local officials or employers;
- generating change internally to strengthen social cohesion and empower marginalised sub-groups, such as women or youth. (Demos, 6)

These are the activities that have characterised the history of the ARC – as a thorn in the side of the ‘authorities’ and a protector of more vulnerable sections of the Asian community. ARC should review current activity to ensure that the organisation is continuing

these traditions while addressing more contemporary concerns. In a time of extreme distrust of most institutions, including institutions that purport to be based in the community, ARC retains its reputation for honesty.

'The people who were involved at the beginning, they were honest people and they left a sort of example there and now I think nobody could dare to do anything because of the other people's honesty is encouraging them to become honest.' GN

In the light of recent constitutional changes, it is very important that the ARC develops a mechanism to evaluate the working relationship between management committee and staff and to assess the profile and reputation of the organisation in the communities it serves. There seems to be little doubt that there is continuing need;

'There is a need for it and the need is growing day by day. Families are getting larger and larger and problems are getting more and more. One family used to have one problem – now the six members of the family they have their own problems, so six problems in one family. And still I believe that I would like it to be called 'Asian Resource Centre' because day by day it's becoming a symbol and it is a name of the Centre that satisfies people now, because it is so old now, 25, 26 years and people have benefited from it and even now its name gives them a satisfaction'. GN

This may turn out to be one of the key challenges – how to retain the high value accorded to the 'symbol' of the ARC, by developing appropriate services and also retaining a credibility with the local community. It is clearly very important to hold onto a sense that this is a project that is part of this neighbourhood and belongs to the Asian communities rather than a 'white' organisation from outside

the neighbourhood – but that is not ethnically exclusive, or the property of any one community.

'What you need, I suppose, is an organisation, I don't know if it would be ARC or anything else, that can bridge all of that and can see beyond that. That can do things that people do, everyday activities, that cut **across all those boundaries** and perhaps even initiate debate about why are we turning like this [to communalism]? I think when it comes to communalism and community work with that, a lot of people try to sweep it under the carpet and say leave it there and it will go away, whereas I think if it was constructed into a safe debate, it would be much more useful. But then it would have to be done by people who were trusted by all elements and had credibility to all of them.' SG

That credibility can not be built quickly, it requires time for trust to come. Surinder Guru described this as;

'Genuine work, genuine community work, over time, because it can't be seen over a month … if you have been there two, three, four, six, ten years, people have seen you, look, this is who you are, I think people do trust you.' SG

It is the track record of the Asian Resource Centre that may allow the organisation to challenge new forms of racism and division. There is a danger that community organisations will under-estimate the extent of these dangers and that funders will seek a quick fix to this problem. In this context, the last word is a reminder of how precious and rare it is to see a longstanding organisation that can stand against bigotry and division among communities.

‘The idea of an ARC is an oasis where otherwise you do see the growth of fundamentalism and the growth of communalism – and you see that happening in all communities.’ AH

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