

Dharam Singh, Jagmohan Joshi and Anti-Racist Alternatives

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Dharam Singh came to Leamington in 1962 as a graduate of Punjab University and was employed as a civilian clerk at the Ammunition Depot at Kineton. He was a member of the Indian Workers Association (IWA) and became a leading figure in the Indian community in Leamington. In 1965, his house at 51 Avenue Road was the home of Leamington's local Indian leader Dharam Singh.¹ In 1965, the house would be the target of a shocking, racist attack that would propel Leamington's migrant political activists to amplify their efforts and demands for equality, dignity and integration. The refusal to continue brushing the ongoing racism in Leamington and in the Commonwealth under the carpet would eventually lead to a monumental moment for black power and anti-imperialist politics in the UK – the formation of the Black People's Alliance by Jagmohan Joshi, which would take place three years after the incident and just three houses down from Singh's home, in 57 Avenue Road.

Racial tensions began to mount in 1964 with racist slogans and swastikas being painted around Leamington in white paint. At around this time, there was a significant migrant population of around 1,500 residing in the town, most of them being Indians and West Indians.² Surprisingly enough the local police would repeatedly dismiss these incidents as isolated hooliganism, refusing to see them as an indication of the racial tensions and hostile attitudes towards migrants in Leamington.³ This passivity was only reinforced when the Leamington Labour Party nominated Dharam Singh – an Indian migrant who was also in the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) – as a candidate in the municipal election of May 1964.⁴ In the opinion of Cecil Burrows, the secretary-agent of the Warwick and Leamington Labour Constituency, this stood as a testament to the fact that discrimination was not an issue in Leamington.⁵ However, many were certain that this is when trouble escalated.⁶ The daubing continued into the October 1964 general election and newspaper reports detail how the family homes and businesses of people of colour had bricks thrown through their windows.⁷

The IWA preceded the Black People's Alliance, originating in Coventry but eventually spreading its branches to Leamington, as well as Birmingham and London as Punjabi migrants began to settle in those areas. Between 1964 and 1979 the IWA was led by Jagmohan Joshi, who had been instrumental in establishing the Birmingham branch and setting up a centralised body for the organisation.⁸ It originally focused on improving the working lives of Indian immigrants and defending their culture, and later began concentrating its efforts on political campaigning – condemning fascism, racism and exclusion towards black and Asian migrants in Britain.

Alongside activity by the IWA, in April 1964 the annual meeting of the Warwickshire Standing Conference of Women's Organizations at the Town Hall echoed the marked sentiment that more had to be done to integrate and improve conditions for the ever-growing migrant population in Leamington. One hundred delegates attended the event and heard the keynote speaker, Miss Kathleen Halpin, fervently call for such efforts to be made, re-emphasising also the continued importance of women in the struggle for equality.⁹

¹ *The Birmingham Post*, 14 February, 1964, p.5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jenkins, Simon and Victoria Randall (1971) *Here to Live: A Study of Race Relations in an English Town*. London: Runnymede Trust, p. 14

⁴ In the event Singh came bottom of the poll in the Conservative stronghold of Jephson Ward.

⁵ *The Birmingham Post*, 14 February, 1964, p.5.

⁶ *Here to Live*, p. 13.

⁷ Indeed, three days before the local election in May, posters appeared in Leamington that repeated the infamous racist slogan used by the 1964 Conservative parliamentary candidate for Smethwick, Peter Griffiths. The leader of various neo-Nazi parties and one time resident of Leamington Colin Jordan claimed that the slogan had originated with his supporters, some of whom were active in Leamington. *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 5 May 1964, p. 35. See also *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 13 November, 1964, p.26.

⁸ Papers of the Indian Workers Association (1959-1998), Birmingham Library.

⁹ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 6 April 1964, p. 8.

The struggle for integration continued and encountered a particularly sinister low in 1965 when a burning cross was wedged in the door of 51 Avenue Road and a brick launched through the window. Just a few weeks prior another burning cross had been nailed to the front door of an empty house of Avenue Road, likely number 57. One suspect was Robert Relf, a known sympathiser of the far Right who had previously been fined for daubing racist slogans. The incident confirmed the presence of a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) branch in Birmingham, after Relf told reporters he had raised the matter of Dharam Singh's support for Leamington's Indians in one of their meetings.¹⁰ While the then Mayor Dr. Dorey condemned the acts as a "cheap imitation of the grim organisation" in America, the police did not seem to have any intention of seriously putting a stop to the escalated racist aggression.¹¹

The incident marked a cross-roads for race relations in Leamington due to Singh and Joshi's very different responses – Joshi suggested that Indians would hit back if violence was used against them while Singh wanted to disassociate himself from that idea.¹² Singh was concerned that a violent response would be even more detrimental to the migrant community and the plight for "racial tolerance" since the violent fascists constituted only a small minority in the community.¹³ Indeed, Singh had recently left the IWA to establish a Warwickshire branch of the more socially-oriented and politically moderate Indian National Association.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the racist attacks continued and in 1966 three Sikh-owned shops in Leamington had their windows smashed several times by raiders, and racist slogans re-appeared on walls and railway bridges.¹⁵ The owners of the shops were forced to buy guns to defend themselves should it occur again, a response which the authorities dismissed as extreme and unnecessary. These events were part of a notable increase in hostility towards black and ethnic minorities, not only in Leamington but the rest of Britain. In 1968 the Commonwealth Immigration Act stripped Asians in East Africa of their British citizenship and also saw Conservative MP Enoch Powell give his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech attacking anti-discrimination laws.

Spurred by these Jagmohan Joshi sought a collective immigrant response. The Black People's Alliance emerged after a lengthy six hour private meeting in 57 Avenue Road, where 50 delegates representing 20 immigrant organisations met and committed themselves to a nationwide campaign of militant action to combat racialism.¹⁶ Groups with white members or middle class reformist goals were not allowed to join.¹⁷ Speaking to reporters, Joshi declared it "the first time in the history of race relations in this country that black people had decided to unite forces to combat discrimination and the onslaught of fascism".¹⁸

The Black People's Alliance was short lived, organising only a few demonstrations before coming undone due to internal factionalism and a lack of broad based support.¹⁹ Indeed, Dharam Singh's branch of the Indian National Association announced an "anti-Black Power programme" which emphasised the importance of working within the political context by lobbying MPs, mobilising immigrant voting strength at election time and participating in British trade union activities.²⁰ However, in uniting ethnic

¹⁰ *The Birmingham Post*, 8 June, 1965, p. 30.

¹¹ *The Birmingham Post*, 9 June, 1965, p. 5.

¹² *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 9 June, 1965, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See *Here to Live*.

¹⁵ *Sunday Mirror*, 13 November, 1966, p.21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Wild, Rosalind Eleanor (2008) *Black was the Colour of Our Fight. Black Power in Britain, 1955-1976*. PhD thesis, University of Sheffield.

¹⁸ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 29 April, 1968, p.43.

¹⁹ For instance, the day after the BPA was formed the president of the Coventry branch of the IWA declared that the organisation was sponsored by the Indian Communist Association of Great Britain and did not speak for the general Indian community in Leamington or elsewhere. *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 29 April 1968, p. 41.

²⁰ *Here to Live*.

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minority groups around their shared experience of racism and bringing people of colour together under the umbrella of 'political blackness' the Black People's Alliance had a lasting legacy in shaping the British Black Power movement.²¹

²¹ Narayan, John (2019) 'British Black Power: The Anti-Imperialism of Political Blackness and the Problem of Nativist Socialism', *The Sociological Review*, 67: 5, pp. 945-967.