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## The Greater London Council's Initiatives: A Precursor of British Asian Radio Broadcasting

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*Abstract: By the mid-1970s, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Independent Local Radio (ILR) sector started catering to the local Asian migrant listener community in England, by producing Asian radio programming output in English and in Asian languages such as Hindi and Urdu. In the 1980s, the Greater London Council (GLC) came up with its own initiatives to cater to London's Asian migrant community. This article describes GLC's initiatives through its Community Radio Unit, which encouraged independent British Asian radio broadcasting in England.*

### Background

British Asian broadcasting began in England in the 1960s due to the escalation in Asian immigration (Khamkar, 2017). By the mid-1970s, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) local radio as well as the Independent Local Radio (ILR) sector had already begun to consider catering to the Asian migrant listener community in large Asian-populated areas on local levels. In 1977 the Annan Committee specified that the role of the media in multi-cultural Britain was important, and therefore asserted a significant responsibility that the broadcasters needed to carry by reflecting the variety of the views of the multi-racial society. The Committee emphasized that media must consider how best they could cater to the varied tastes and needs of different cultures through their programming output (Page, 1983; Partridge, 1982). The BBC was trying to cater to the actual needs and demands of the local Asian community. It also started providing production facilities and training to enable the Asian community members, who were involved in radio broadcasting, to improve their production skills. Thus there was a positive change in terms of more integration across the BBC's radio programming output. At the same time, the ILR stations had

also started catering to the ethnic and Asian migrant listener community by broadcasting radio programs in English and Asian languages. These radio stations also started looking at Asian businesses from the potential advertisers and thus started making available their advertising space for Asian businesses. Following these efforts on the BBC and ILR sector level, the Greater London Council (GLC) came up with its own initiatives to cater to London's Asian migrant community. Thus the 1980s was a significant decade as it saw further radio initiatives, which proved to be a precursor of subsequent independent British Asian radio broadcasting in England (Khamkar, 2017). This article describes the GLC's initiatives through its Community Radio Unit, which later helped the Asian community members get ready for the independent Asian radio sector. The research draws from archives as well as interviews carried out with key figures involved in independent British Asian radio lobbying in England.

## The Greater London Council's Initiatives

Despite the contribution from the BBC and Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) towards Asian radio programming, there was a growing sense that the ethnic minority groups were not generally well represented on mainstream radio. The Black, Asian, and other ethnic communities of London were becoming increasingly critical of their perceived marginalization in the media, which was alienating the communities they were supposed to address. During this time, the newly elected administration of the GLC began to have a significant effect on the trend towards more localized and often community-specific radio (Lewis & Booth, 1989; Tsagarousianou, 1999).

Between 1981 and 1986 the GLC under the leadership of Ken Livingstone pioneered a new strategy of making minority communities feel part of British society. It drew up equal opportunities policies, established race relations units, and provided funding to minority groups (West, 2011). The year 1984 was declared as Anti-Racist Year (Greater London Council's Ethnic (Asian) Arts Subcommittee, 1984) by the GLC. Professor Jerry White, in his article *The Greater London Council 1965–1986*, claims that the Council's anti-racism agitation that was carried out in London forced Londoners to think seriously about the consequences of living in a multicultural society and it probably changed behavior for the better. At the heart of the GLC's anti-racist strategy were not simply the reallocation of resources, but also a redefinition of racism. Racism now meant not the denial of equal rights, but the denial of the right to be different (Malik, 2012). The GLC's arts and media policy provided subsidies for the alternative cultural and media initiatives, which were entirely different from the mainstream ones. It encouraged minorities to express their own identity, live by their own values, pursue their own lifestyles and no longer get forced to adopt a British identity.

The GLC established eleven Working Groups, which started working in housing, trade unions, churches and religious groups, health, education, cultural activities, media, police, voluntary organizations, and designers (to make posters for the

publicity). These Working Groups were encouraged to conduct workshops to be able to support women and ethnic minorities. They were given the funding to encourage starting their own activities. A personal commitment by Londoners to participate in the "London Against Racism" campaign (Greater London Council's Ethnic (Asian) Arts Sub-Committee, 1984a, p. 365) was requested for this Anti-Racist Year. Individuals and organizations were asked to sign a pledge supporting the five aims and objectives of the campaign. These five points asked people to recognize that racism ran through all aspects of London; to not ignore or condone it; to agree with the fundamental right of all Londoners to enjoy a level of real equality, justice, freedom and security that currently does not exist; to create conditions at home, at work, and in the community that make it impossible for racism to operate; to join with others to fight the disadvantages common to them all; and to examine, criticize, challenge, and change the structures that perpetuate racism in organizations (Greater London Council's Ethnic (Asian) Arts Sub-Committee, 1984a, p. 365). As part of this campaign, the GLC organized a migrants, immigrants, and refugees conference "Coming together for equal rights" in October 1984 (Greater London Council, 1984a, p. 2).

The GLC believed that migrants and refugees are among the most exploited and vulnerable sections of the population. Many thousands of them live in daily fear of deportation, internal immigration controls, and passport raids, while facing unemployment, low-paid menial jobs, and racism and do not enjoy basic civil rights such as the right to vote, the right to free movement, and the right to work where they choose. This has led them to the understanding that the migrants and refugees must gather together to fight this oppression (Greater London Council, 1984a, p. 2). Thus, the aim of this Conference was to bring migrants and refugees together to discuss these issues of common concern and to promote organization that will lead to greater unity between communities in acting to change this situation (Greater London Council, 1984a, p. 2). It also displayed an exhibition of photographs about the lives of migrants, immigrants, and refugees in London to provide a visual record of some of the communities participating in the conference (Greater London Council, 1984a, p. 2, 370). The Asian Community Action Group (ACAG) applied for Grant of £1190 toward running costs to organize Asian community festivals of music and dance, as well as Asian dance and music workshops at schools (Greater London Council, 1984b). The aim of ACAG was "to promote Asian culture in South London and to give the Asian community there the opportunity to express their artistic talents." (Greater London Council, 1984b, p. 1). The Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee decided to recommend a grant of £1350 for these activities (Greater London Council, 1984b, p. 1). The Media Working Group set up a monitoring exercise to look at the treatment of ethnic minority communities in London by the media (Greater London Council, 1984c). According to Gilroy (2013), the declaration of London as an "anti-racist zone" and the announcement that 1984 was to be an anti-racist year showed that the struggle against racism would be a continual and primary focus of the GLC's work (p. 181). By developing a dominant media policy, the GLC played an important role.

Therefore, the GLC's initiatives between 1982 and 1986, under the leadership of Ken Livingstone to start its Community Radio Unit and its radio projects are very important in this context. These initiatives helped create awareness of the importance and relevance of such community platforms for small communities including migrant communities in British multicultural society.

Through its commitment to anti-racist/sexist policies and the funding of community arts, the GLC created its Community Radio Development Unit in 1982. Simon Partridge was part of the GLC's Community Radio Development Project. Partridge recalls:

When the community radio movement had got going in the early 1980s and, because getting access to the airwaves meant convincing the Home Office in those days that this was a legitimate political project or social project, you couldn't really avoid getting involved with government, either at national or at regional or local level. We knew that Ken Livingstone's GLC was sympathetic towards radical people-orientated projects. One of our members Richard Barbrook had links with John McDonald in the GLC who was a left wing counsellor—he became an MP, as did several of the leading GLC counsellors, including Ken Livingstone (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014).

There was no Community Radio Unit as such within the GLC at the beginning, but Partridge along with other members convinced the GLC to set it up. It was also known as the development project. According to Partridge, it was always difficult to find where radio fit, as it did not fit in very happily with the Home Office, which had responsibility for the airwaves, so it became part of the GLC's Arts Policy Development Committee (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014). As an important step forward, the GLC, under the leadership of Ken Livingstone, developed an "interventionist media policy from 1982 onwards, arguing that media impinged on several policy areas, including arts and recreation, and industry and employment" (Tsagarousianou, 1999, p. 58).

The GLC initially encouraged only multicultural radio station projects, as it believed that there could not be a separate radio station having separate programs such as the Asian or the Afro-Caribbean programs, for separate ethnic communities (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013). But later the GLC's radio projects for Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities facilitated these community groups in building the infrastructures, facilities, and more importantly training, in order to make these community groups ready and equipped to apply for the future radio licenses.

Lewis and Booth (1989) state:

The Community Radio Development Unit became the best-resourced centre of information, advice, research and funding in the country. Its Local Radio Forum which met for the first time in October 1982 identified areas for intervention and research—the latter on foreign experience, frequency space in London and public attitudes to community radio—and Afro-Caribbean, Asian and other

minority groups became prominent in the community radio debate as a result of GLC interest and funding. (p. 106)

Salim Salam was one of the prominent Asian community radio campaigners during this period. According to Salam, Indian and Pakistani groups, who listened to mainstream radio stations for music, chat shows and phone-ins, sports, and general news, felt that there was little representation of the Asian community on mainstream radio stations and the programming was felt to be predominately White (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013). According to Partridge (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014), there was a very strong anti-racist approach within the GLC. It raised the profile of ethnic minorities and women within the GLC's development project.

Partridge recalls:

I think what was interesting, at that point, was because of the lack of frequencies available, it became very clear that one could have a London-wide radio station catering for special interests but they would have to share a transmitter. One of the really interesting issues that I grappled with and I can even now remember some incredible meetings where I had, in a room full of people, there were Orthodox Jewish people, there were gay people, there were people from ethnic minorities, probably some feminists and the only thing they had in common, at a certain level, was they wanted access to a transmitter. I can remember some really hair-raising meetings where you wondered when the explosion was going to happen. People were coming from very different places and I think I saw our role as saying, "Look, if we're going to get access to the airwaves, we're going to have to respect each other's differences ... so, there were inter-ethnic tensions as well." (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014)

The GLC's Community Radio Development Unit was initially about influencing policy to encourage; however, it later became the third tier of radio. The Unit wanted to influence policy and create the capacity to set up local radio stations in addition to the BBC and ILR stations. It was mainly for under-represented ethnic minorities groups in society. Salam explains that this Community Radio Development Unit's idea was to have a multicultural radio project, and not specifically or separately to have Asian and Afro-Caribbean radio projects (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013). The GLC had some grants available and it wanted to fund activities aimed at ethnic minorities. The issue was that the GLC was encouraging multicultural radio stations only as it thought that there cannot be a radio station having separate programs for different ethnic communities such as Asian or Afro-Caribbean programs; that was a debate going on during those years.

According to Salam, the under-represented ethnic minorities in England were mainly the Asian community and the African-Caribbean community (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013). These two biggest communities should be a priority as they are under-represented. The Asian community radio campaigners

continuously fought for this and convinced the GLC that there was a need for separate radio projects for the Asian and Afro-Caribbean community in addition to the multicultural radio project. The GLC agreed and thus funded Asian and Afro-Caribbean projects as well. The Afro-Caribbean Radio project was set up in Brixton, the Asian Radio Studio Project was in Islington (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013; Lewis & Booth, 1989).

Salam strongly believes that:

The multicultural model would not have worked looking at the size and diversity of the ethnic communities, millions of people, many different languages within the groups, many different religions—multicultural is not going to work. (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013)

On the other hand, according to Partridge, it wasn't just a debate about the multicultural model within the GLC; this is still an ongoing debate in British culture about separation versus integration (S. Partridge, personal communication June 2014). Partridge recalls:

I remember being worried about this. Is this becoming a mechanism for division and ghettoisation? There had obviously been some sort of black versus Asian conflict, as there was competition for limited airwaves. It's always quite difficult in these situations to separate out what you could call a technical issue from a socio-political issue. Also the South Asian community is homogeneous, so there are a few assumptions there, and so you are entering a very complicated socio-cultural field.... And probably some word was coming down from the Home Office saying, look, we're worried about the possible division (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014).

With reference to this conflict amongst the communities within the community regarding having different programs for different communities in different languages rather than having a common multicultural model, BBC Radio London firmly believed that catering to these multicultural communities in the English language was the most suitable option.

In a reply to the request of one of the Asian community members from London and also a correspondent for *Banga Barta* news Hakim Alkamal, BBC Radio London's Education Producer Keith Yeomans categorically states:

London's Asian population spans many language groups, and it would be hard to represent even the major ones fairly, in the time available each week. Conversations with educationalists and members of the Asian communities suggest that a high proportion of young Asians use English as their main language, and this is certainly borne out by the number of letters the BBC Radio London receives each week—more than those received by the previous Asian language programmes, and virtually all in English (The Listener, June 15, 1978).

However, Salam believes that when people listen to radio, they identify with their station, the station that plays their kind of music, or the station that broadcasts in their language and they are loyal to that (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013). But on the other hand, the GLC's Community Radio Development Unit believed in the Multicultural model. It did the action research by going out and talking to people and seeing what they wanted, seeing how people would collaborate, although the key to the airwaves was held by the Home Office and not by the GLC.

According to Partridge:

The Unit had already got some quite good contacts within the Home Office, but there was a political difficulty in terms of negotiating with the Home Office, which was quite a traditional government department negotiating with the radical left-wing bit of local government. It wasn't until quite a lot later that we did actually get access to the airwaves. We didn't actually do any broadcasting while I was there. On one level it was rather abstract (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014).

Therefore, as there was no access to the airwaves, multicultural radio having Asian, Caribbean, and other ethnic groups sharing the frequency was the policy of the GLC Community Radio team. Under the leadership of Ken Livingstone, the GLC introduced its four pioneering projects: a women's radio station, Asian Radio Studio Project (ARSP), Afro-Caribbean Radio Project (ACP), and Spectrum Radio. It budgeted more than £600,000 to finance studios for four community radio projects to cover all of London. Much of the finance for these new radio projects had already been paid over to escape ratecapping, which came into effect in April 1985. The GLC accelerated these projects because it needed to spend a proportion of its reserves before the introduction of ratecapping. In normal circumstances the council would have wanted to spend a year researching the project before going ahead (Hewson, 1985, p. 3). Strongly committed to "anti-racist, anti-sexist policies," the GLC funded a variety of groups in the field of arts and community politics (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013; Tsagarousianou, 1999, p. 58).

Thus, the GLC authorized the building of studios for a women's radio station, an Afro-Caribbean station, an Asian radio studio, and a radio project for other ethnic minorities. The GLC money went toward building basic studios and also to finance the planning of the radio stations, but it was not going to pay for the transmitters. The GLC hoped that the community radio stations would become financially independent (Hewson, 1985, p. 3). However, all the four projects were told that they couldn't transmit any programs until they were legalized.

Shirley Linden was the Head of the GLC's Arts and Media Policy Group. According to Linden, the council had no plans to take on the role of the running of the stations, but hoped that there could be changes in the regulatory rules

surrounding radio, which would enable the new community stations to become a cross between the BBC and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (Hewson, 1985, p. 3). It was a responsible public action to start an experiment with these community radio stations. The GLC was looking at the regulatory system, which could be introduced to choose between people competing for the licenses. The plan was to give money to the potential and interested applicants to build studios, but money wouldn't be provided to broadcast, as the GLC did not want to join the unregulated radio movement—it wanted these radio projects to be legitimate and genuine community radio stations (Hewson, 1985, p. 3).

The GLC could not fund radio stations because nobody had a license to broadcast, and there were no licenses around. Being part of the GLC's short-lived Asian Radio Studio Project in 1985, Salam recalls:

The only licences that existed were the national and local radio, independent local radio and BBC local radio, first and second tier, national and local radio. There was illegal pirate radio broadcasting, so the groups like RJR, DBC, Sina Radio for the Asian community, were broadcasting illegally, calling themselves community stations or pirate radio, but illegal. Obviously the GLC, as a publically funded body, was not going to fund these groups to broadcast illegally. And as there were no legal licences available, they could not fund radio stations. All they could fund were projects, which might eventually develop into radio stations when licences became available (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013).

Discussions between the GLC and interested parties showed strong interest in community radio and criticism of the existing radio stations. These discussions had found unrest, especially with the existing stations' attitudes towards ethnic minorities and women. The program policies of the new stations were planned independently of the council, but the groups were subject to some form of monitoring and scrutiny after they went on air (Hewson, 1985, p. 3). However, the Home Office was surprised by the GLC's move, as the incomplete initiative by the Home Office on the new tier of radio stations had specifically emphasized that no one could be guaranteed a license, including the GLC pilot projects or the existing unregulated radio stations.

These projects were set up to facilitate training for the local Asian community to be able to use a community radio platform. Salam recalls the initiation of the Asian Radio Studio Project:

We were going to set up radio studios for training, to train people, to train the Asian community in radio production, and to create a base, a talent base and a quantitative and qualitative mass of people so that when licences became available, we would have been ready to go. That was the idea. The chance of getting funding from the GLC to do it, obviously was very interesting, very attractive, so we were very interested in getting the funding to do the Asian Radio Studio Project and making it work. We were not officially allowed to



broadcast, so we did not want to broadcast illegally, as in case we were then barred from having a licence, as the government made it clear that if anyone broadcast illegally, they would not get a licence. So we didn't want to be broadcasting illegally, but only to train people through this project. So we used the money to build studios in Islington, and that's where we were going to start training. Unfortunately, the GLC was closed down, and so the project couldn't work any further (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013).

Thus, the GLC gave funding grants to build up the studios to train ethnic and Asian community members who were interested in starting their own radio stations. The Unit provided some studio workshops for ethnic and Asian community members (S. Partridge, personal communication, June 2014). Salam was discontented with the GLC's multicultural strategy:

I will freely admit that the ARSP was a disaster, mainly because of splits within the group and the dubious agendas of some members, but also because I spent so much time fighting the strategic dirty war against the leadership of the Community Radio Association, who all had access to government ministers and civil servants who were preparing to offer licences for a "third tier" of radio stations (S. Salam, personal communication, July 2013).

However, the important role played by the Asian Radio Studio Project in the development of Asian radio services in England cannot be overlooked. It was a pioneering project to train local Asian group members to be able to use a community radio platform. The first Asian commercial radio station *Sunrise Radio* eventually evolved through it in November 1989.

The Margaret Thatcher government dissolved the GLC in March 1986. Thatcher saw the GLC as a left-wing organization that was politically opposed to what she wanted for London. According to March and Olson (1983), politicians frequently advocate administrative reorganizations but then fail to deliver. But the execution of the GLC was different. The GLC leader Ken Livingstone's interferences on issues of world war and peace were considered outside the constitutional sphere of councilors. The Conservative Party Manifesto of May 1983, a government white paper produced in October 1983, and public statements by Patrick Jenkin, appointed Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment (DoE) after the 1983 General Election, all asserted that the GLC was administratively redundant (O'Leary, 1987). They claimed that the GLC was "wasteful and unnecessary tiers of government" and the GLC's abolition would "save money and streamline the cities" (O'Leary, 1987). As a result, the plan was implemented and the GLC was dissolved in March 1986. With the abolition of the GLC, its Community Radio Unit's initiatives were also terminated abruptly in March 1986. However, the media policy of GLC's Community Radio Unit during these four consecutive years empowered the Asian community in starting an independent Asian radio platform. This was exhibited in the late 1980s. In 1989, the Independent

Broadcasting Authority (IBA) awarded 21 new incremental radio licenses for more specifically defined communities, “of which seven were identified as ethnic” (Starkey, 2015, p. 114). Asian community groups were amongst those successful in obtaining incremental radio licenses. *Sunrise Radio* was one of them, which had benefitted from the GLC’s Community Radio Unit’s initiatives including the Asian Radio Studio Project. *Sunrise Radio* launched in November 1989 to broadcast first for West London’s Asian community, then across the Greater London and the Midlands in England. It was the first 24-hour Asian radio station to begin in the UK.

Thus, the GLC’s objective to help local Asian community groups in setting up a radio station and to facilitate training to be able to use a community radio platform was fulfilled. The GLC’s Community Radio Unit gave advice and funding to various ethnic and minority groups in London “to assist the creation of radio workshops, to commission research and to increase public understanding of the possibilities of community radio” (Lewis, 2008, p. 9). This Unit researched the radio frequency space in London and public attitudes to community radio (British Research Unit, 1985). It became the best-resourced center of information, advice, research, and funding in the country (International Broadcast Authority, 1985). Through the GLC’s mentoring, Asian migrant community groups were trained and empowered to use the radio medium independently. Thus, the GLC, its Community Radio Unit and its Asian Radio Studio Project played a significant role in training the Asian migrant community in London to produce relevant community programming. It subsequently assisted them in contributing to debates around the benefits of establishing a third tier of radio, which ultimately led to what we now know as Independent British Asian Radio.

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