

Rajesh Thind- Defiance: Fighting The Far Right-

Summary by Saima Saleh

Date and Time of session

BST Thursday 4th July 2024, 5-6pm

Further details

- Chair – Saima Saleh (RE Lead and NATRE Exec)

Defiance: Fighting The Far Right is a three-part documentary series first shown on Channel 4 in April 2024. It focused on the rising racial tensions across many parts of England during the 70s and 80s. Much of the racial conflict was said to have stemmed from right-wing groups such as the National Front and British National Party, whose ideology primarily consisted of anti-immigrant policies, 'racial purity' and defending the interests of white folks (white working class in particular). Their overt racist attitudes and hatred often resulted in violent attacks against black and brown folks.

We were delighted to have Rajesh Thind as our guest. Rajesh is an acclaimed Director, Writer and Producer of premium documentaries and television dramas with over 20 years' experience in the business, 'Defiance' being one of his latest works. Rajesh notable achievement also includes his work on the with Bafta-winning Rogan Production, Uprising, Freddie Mercury: The Final Act.

Background information

Most South East Asian and Black folks (predominately from the Caribbean) came to England post WW2- The reason for the mass migration from the 'Commonwealth' was due to (the colonial motherland) inviting their colonial subjects to work as doctors, health workers, factory workers/other forms of 'menial labour, in order to help rebuild the nation. However, the opportunities they were given often resulted in them doing low paid 'menial labour', which often acted as a synonym for "jobs that many white workers refused to do'. An influx of Black -Afro Caribbeans- arrived first, through the Windrush generation. South East Asian communities typically came from countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. They often settled in areas such as Southall, Leicester, West Midlands- namely Birmingham, Hounslow, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield.

Turning points

The murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, an 18 year old Sikh student who was brutally stabbed to death on Southall High Street by a gang of white youths, was a significant turning point. One of the many consequences of this fatal attack was that many within the South East Asian and Black communities were no longer going to suffer at the hands of far right extremists. An example of an act of resistance was through the formation of Asian Youth Movements (AYMs), which were set up to defend communities and demand equal rights and

justice. Unfortunately, Gurdeep's murder was downplayed and right-wing views dominated the narrative.

Amongst many of the harrowing events, the documentary highlighted the awful death of Blair Peach, the Southhall based New Zealander teacher, peace activist and respected figure within the NUT (now NEU-, a teaching union). Blair had been killed during an anti-racism demonstration in Southhall in 1979, when exiting a protest. He was hit over the head by a member of the Special Patrol group (a specialist unit within the Metropolitan Police). He later died in hospital, as a result of his injuries. No-one was ever charged for his death. As a mark of respect for his life and efforts, the local authority permitted one teacher from each school to have a day of paid absence in order to attend Blair's funeral.

To compare the reception of the deaths of Peach Blair and Chaggar Singh, we need to look at the similarities and differences in how these events were received by the public, media, and other relevant stakeholders.

Similarities

1. Public Outcry and Protests:

- **Blair Peach:** His death sparked significant public outrage and led to widespread protests and calls for justice. Many folks took to the streets to demand accountability and changes to prevent such tragedies from recurring.
- **Chaggar Singh:** Similarly, Singh's death also resulted in public demonstrations and significant protests. The community and supporters rallied to seek justice and sought to address the underlying issues that led to his death.

2. Media Coverage:

- **Blair Peach:** The media extensively covered his death, highlighting the circumstances, public reaction, and the broader social and political implications. His story became a focal point for discussions about systemic issues.
- **Chaggar Singh:** Singh's death also received extensive media attention. Reports and analysis delved into the details of the incident, the response from authorities, and the societal implications, keeping the issue in the public eye.

3. Demand for Institutional Reform:

- **Blair Peach:** Blair's death led to calls for reforms within the institutions involved, namely, policing and healthcare. Activists and public figures pushed for these changes to be introduced with urgency to prevent future occurrences.
- **Chaggar Singh:** In a similar vein, Singh's death galvanised demands for institutional reforms. There were calls for policy changes and for more transparency and accountability regarding the actions of the police.

Differences

1. Nature of the Incident:

- **Blair Peach:** The specific circumstances of Blair's death might have involved different factors, such as the role of law enforcement, a particular incident of violence, or systemic failures in a particular sector.
- **Chaggar Singh:** Singh's death may have stemmed from a different context, such as a hate crime, an accident, or a specific act of negligence by a different set of actors, leading to variations in public and media focus.

2. Cultural and Social Context:

- **Blair Peach:** The cultural and social context surrounding Blair's death, including his background and the demographic he represented, influenced the nature of the public response and the media's narrative.
- **Chaggar Singh:** Singh's death was influenced by his 'alien/ threatening' cultural and social background, which would probably have affected the reception differently, highlighting issues specific to his community or drawing attention to different systemic problems.

3. Long-term Impact and Policy Outcomes:

- **Blair Peach:** The long-term impact of Blair's death might have led to specific policy changes or reforms, influenced political movements, or had a lasting effect on public consciousness in a particular way.

An example of a long term impact was that civil rights groups and anti-racist groups in the UK, such as the Anti-Nazi League and the Campaign for Racial Equality, gained strength, advocating for justice and greater accountability for the victims.

An example of policy reform, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), now the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), was established to enhance the effectiveness of investigations into police misconduct.

- **Chaggar Singh:** The outcomes following Singh's death could differ, perhaps resulting in different types of policy changes, reforms, or shifts in public awareness, based on the unique factors and responses surrounding his case.

An example of a long term impact was to see a rise of anti-racist organisations such as the Southall Youth Movement, whose aim was to support and protect its community.

An example of policy reform from this time was the introduction of a key piece of legislation: the Race Relations Act 1976, which aimed to tackle discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, nationality, ethnic origin in

various areas such as education, employment and the provision of goods and services.

These comparisons highlight how both deaths were received with significant public and media attention, leading to calls for justice and reform, but differed in the specific circumstances, cultural contexts, and long-term impacts.

With racial tension spread across many cities in England, Black and Brown folks were blamed for being responsible for poor housing, lack of provisions and mass unemployment, and this led to many instances of violent attacks. In England during this time, laws such as the 1965 Race Relations Act¹ stated that it was illegal to discriminate on the grounds of colour, race, ethnicity or national origins. So whilst seemingly in the eyes of the law, those who belong to the global majority should have been protected under the law, such laws and legislations seemed to have little impact in practice.

This situation was exacerbated in 1968 with senior politician Enoch Powell's famous 'Rivers of Blood' speech². In his infamous speech, he strongly criticised immigration from the Commonwealth nations. Powell, one of the most divisive politics of that era caused a political storm when he called for the repatriation of immigrants. In his notorious address, Powell warned that the country had gone "literally mad" in its acceptance of mass migration; this being problematic as far right wing rhetoric was being fanned and normalised from the corridors of power (i.e., if politicians in Parliament could say these things, then it was acceptable to have these views).

My personal thoughts and reflections

Born in Liverpool and having lived there until 1979, I can still remember the level of violence my family and I experienced. Petrol bombs, bricks being thrown through our windows, verbal and physical abuse were common occurrences.

I can still remember how 'normal' it was to have a fire extinguisher as part of the furniture in our downstairs hallway.

At the age of 5, I had a boulder thrown at my head as I walked to school with my mother. I was then hospitalised for three nights. No-one was held accountable for this incident.

The documentary series focused on the lived experiences of a varied group of people who had all experienced some extent of racism in the 70s and 80s. Their harrowing ordeals were hard-hitting and distressing at times, to hear. Rajesh noted that many folks from that generation, stated that they watched the series in small chunks due to it triggering a multitude of emotions and memories. Personally, I included myself in this group.

¹ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1965/73/pdfs/ukpga_19650073_en.pdf

² chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://anth1001.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/enoch-powell_speech.pdf

Rajesh invited attendees to 'come off mute' and engage in a group conversation. It was certainly interesting to hear the spectrum of experiences regarding the racism that has existed in England. Some of our attendees admitted that for parts of their lives, they were not aware that 'there was any racism'. However, others shared how they knew what was happening but whose families simply never spoke about it.

The conversation then swiftly moved to *'whether or not racism (in its various forms) had improved or changed, and why learning from history could help us to solve the 'problems'*.

This statement as difficult to sit with as it reminded me of the urgent need for a decolonial RE (and by extension national curriculum), in order for truths to be told.

Question Time

When asked about what the hardest part of making the documentary was, Rajesh spoke about growing up in the 'defiant' atmosphere of Southall in 1979. He recalled having a feeling that things had changed for the better. As an adult, he had researched what had happened back in those difficult times and knew that there was a story waiting to be told. The hardest part of the project was getting it off the ground. He initially took this idea for a documentary to TV producers 15 years ago, where his ideas were rejected and not taken seriously. He then pitched his idea for the documentary again 10 years ago, and received a similar response (though to a less dismissive degree). Finally, Rajesh's pitch was accepted 5 years ago, and he has been working on it since.

The question of how pupils could learn from history kept flowing throughout the conversation. Key questions included, How could we go about bringing changes in our curriculum and at what age children start to evaluate what they learn and to think critically? We also spoke about how we can make safe spaces in school, where children can learn to navigate difficult and uncomfortable aspects of our history through which they can reflect on and learn from.

Whilst watching films and documentaries such as Defiance, we need to remember that in order for us to honour those who fought back for us so that we could have our freedoms and a better way of life, we should unite across cultures, faiths and backgrounds when we remember together, to mark the sacrifice of those brave, defiant people who made a stance to say, "No more!"

Rajesh's closing thoughts

Rajesh spoke about the loss of the Asian Youth Movements of the 1970s and wondered how teenage children were talking about this subject matter nowadays. Again, this linked with how we could use resources and curriculum content in schools to educate pupils. One film club member spoke highly of the NATRE (National Association of Teachers of RE) anti-racist resources³ being extremely helpful to educate children in order to start making a change for the better.

³ <https://www.natre.org.uk/about-natre/projects/anti-racist-re/>

Towards the end of the session, the conversation centred around when it was that children formed their own opinions and that perhaps humans have a status gain 'hard-wired' where 'outsiders' aren't accepted. At this point, the book *The Status Game* by Will Storr⁴ was discussed, which sought to answer the question of 'What makes you, you?' and 'What drives our political and moral beliefs?' Perhaps anthropology offers an answer? Rajesh reflected on how the new 'Planet of the Apes'⁵ film captures this concept. He went on further to suggest how The Ten Commandments were perhaps there to educate against those instincts.

Rajesh concluded the session by asking the question "How do we use series such as *Defiance* to educate our youngsters?" He then went on to suggest that such material could be used on teacher training courses: teachers could draw on what they've learnt when they get to the classroom.

Defiance can be viewed here:

<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/defiance-fighting-the-far-right>

Further reading

The Shoulders We Stand On by Preet Dhillon- for background knowledge

Fight Back by A.M Dassu- a story for primary aged pupils. This is a story based on life after the Manchester Arena bombing of 2017. The protagonist is a young, Muslim girl who experiences racism towards her and decides to 'fight back'.

⁴ *The Status Game* on Human Life and How to Play It by Will Storr

⁵ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11389872/>