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Promoting pluralism and human rights around the world
irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or any other distinction.

‘CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY COHESION: THE SOUTHALL EXPERIENCE’

SWRT – SHRG Conference
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Executive Summary

«Things have changed, my parents were grateful for being in this country and were therefore reluctant in speaking out. I’m not. I don’t have to apologise for being here because I was born and raised here, this is my country, I work here and pay taxes..»

(Jugraj Singh, young person from Southall)

In the field of Anti-discrimination, two important developments took place last year. The launch of the UK Government’s Community Cohesion policy following the unfortunate riots last summer and the United Nations sponsored the World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Discrimination (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa. Cultural Diversity featured strongly in both.

Within the framework the WCAR follow up and according to the conference documents, a UK National Action Plan against racism is currently being formed with the understanding that the issue of cultural diversity and community cohesion will be addressed and reflected appropriately in its provisions.

The government’s community cohesion policy is primarily based on a series of reports (i.e. Ritchie and Clarke, Ouseley and Cattle) that were composed before, and after, last summer’s disturbances that aimed to «identify good practice, key policy issues and new and innovative thinking in the field of community cohesion» (UK Home Office *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* Chaired by Ted Cattle). In both the Cattle report and the Ministerial one that followed it, outlining the government’s approach on community cohesion, Southall is mentioned favourably as a successful example of community cohesion.

The Sikh Human Rights Group held a conference on Cultural Diversity in February 2001 and took on Culture Diversity as one of its major lobby issues at the World Conference in Durban. Since then, SHRG has launched a consultation on the issue of *Cultural Diversity and Community Cohesion* that involves a series of Conferences throughout the country.

The conference in Shouthall was organised by the Sikh Human Rights Group together with the Sikh Welfare and Research Trust and brought together experts and experiences from both within and outside the area. The aim was to discuss the Cattle report and the government’s community cohesion policy but most importantly Southall’s experience of community harmony and cultural diversity.

Culture and Race Relations

- Cultural diversity is one of these terms that although it is acknowledged as being important, for many, its meaning is apparently 'elusive' and controversial. This is so because so far not adequate attention has been paid on trying to bring them into the political discourse as meaningful and crucial concepts that will add weight to the discussions of any future policy that aims to bring about community cohesion on the basis of equality and human rights.
- Cultural diversity policy concerns the understanding, acceptance and promotion of cultural differences on the one hand, and the tackle of racism and discrimination on the other.
- When we talk of equality we have to ask the question «equality in relation to what and whom?». It is equality without reference to any specific group or culture, where we accept that all races and cultures have the same weight and importance in our equation. Culture is an integral part of the anti-racism and anti-discrimination discourse and recognition, acceptance and promotion of cultural diversity could be the antidote to racism and discrimination.
- Racism and discrimination go hand in hand with people's frustration of having to deal with an apparently 'a-political' and 'a-cultural' civic structure and anti-discrimination discourse. The main issue here is the non-existent, limited or bias knowledge about different communities and the lack of a sense of belonging for all.
- Diversity and not homogeneity is the British society's most essential aspect. When this is accepted, cultural diversity will cease to be perceived as a threat and it will be approached as an opportunity for the equal and peaceful co-existence of different peoples.
- Not just tolerance but promotion of cultural diversity.

General

- In the old days people were more united. They were all fighting discrimination on grounds of colour. With the passing of the years things have changed and communities as they feel more settled and free to express their views and opinions, speak against other forms of racism and discrimination that today have become more subtle and complex.
- In our fight against racism and discrimination it is important to avoid placing forms of discrimination in a hierarchy. We all need to be united against all forms of racism and discrimination whatever their manifestations. The community cohesion agenda

offers a distinct opportunity for all different communities to reassess their ways of viewing other communities, concentrating at the same time on how are we going to achieve cohesion by respecting our differences and not by attempting to assimilate and behave like the mainstream white population.

- There is difficulty sometimes to balance between the pride of being a member of our culture and wanting to preserve it and at the same time appreciating other people's culture and allowing some space for it as well.
- People have prejudices, like communities do about each other, what is important is to control them and not let them turn into racism.
- We need to be aware of the issues as well as the way people in power often use situations, playing one community against the other in order to promote their own agenda.
- It is also important to realise that one cannot expect for social conditions to change for the better without changing the rules and regulations that govern them. Change in policy has to take place in a way that it ensures the elimination of racism in this country and the protection and promotion of cultural diversity.
- Political parties' and public bodies' structures need to be changed in order to reflect the cultural diversity of the British society.

Police

- Police is often at the cutting edge of keeping peace in an area. In Southall they are pro-active actors and function with the aim to reduce tensions and conflicts. In doing so they work very closely with the Southall community through a series of projects. They also meet regularly with community representatives and faith leaders, which is something that the rest of the government mechanism avoids in other areas. The latter limit their communication only to secular institutions and organisations, leaving out a very big number of the British population and a great many communities. This has been tried in Southall and failed. Faith communities have a very important, if not the most important, role to play in Southall's community cohesion process.
- On the issue of the Southall regeneration funds not being allowed to be distributed to faith organisations and the paradox of that considering the composition of Southall and the important role faith organisations have played in the preservation of peace in the area; this was something that the central government was responsible for since it was inserted in the funding

guidelines as a condition for the distribution of funds. A lot of money has been wasted away because of that. It hasn't reached the faith organisations that are key actors of the Southall community.

- Human rights training of police officials is crucial. Also essential is appropriate training on the cultures and needs of different communities in their area.
- Public bodies such as the police to make presentations, during recruitment times, to the different communities at places of social interaction such as the temples, universities and youth centres.

Youth

- We need to involve the young people in the process or better give them the space they need to express their views. We need to listen and take their views into consideration.
- Also we tend to give a lot of importance to negative incidents but very little attention is given to all these great initiatives by individuals, organisations and especially young people. We need to encourage such initiatives.
- Unemployment amongst young people needs to be addressed. But the creation of new jobs must go hand in hand with the creation of appropriate places of social interaction, sport and recreation facilities for young people.
- One of the ways of tackling violence locally would be to broaden young people's horizons with the appropriate information on race issues, human rights and cultural diversity education and the organisations of visits to other parts of the country or even better abroad so that they network with other young people and also meet other communities.

Media

- There is a very strong link and established communications paths between local press and the various communities in Southall. This creates a certain type of responsibility upon the reporters as to what they can write and how. They are accountable to the community. The Southall reporters meet with the communities representatives frequently. They aim to be objective and independent of any particular cultural, racial or religious group, balancing each time the needs of the racial and religious groups involved in occasional tensions and community issues. This way they are trusted and valued by people coming from different communities.

- The Southall press reporters, when confronted with controversial community issues, search for the background of the disputes and collect as much information as possible before they decide to write anything. This information is always analysed in great depth, consulting the communities at the same time, and trying to really understand the conflict and the different point of views. This way and combined with their pro-active reporting they often act as mediators in community conflicts and key actors for their resolution.
- In Southall there is also a close link between the local and ethnic press. They very often exchange information and views on issues of common interest.
- The press is mainly directed by commercial interests and the type of audience they think they have. Nevertheless this has to go hand in hand with ethical responsibility.

Strengthening Community Cohesion Policy

- It takes a crises to make the government listen. However the signs are good and it seems that the government is beginning to listen to the community voices. In this, who they consult is important. Often there is no proper consultation with the communities concerned and at times wrong advice is given to the government by people linked to them in advisory capacity.
- All this policy talk on Community Cohesion is very confusing for a lot of community organisations (because of the language but also because a lot of them are suspicious of new policies that seem to be a case of reproducing old ones without really addressing and tackling the issues). All Community organisations and NGOs should be involved in the process from the beginning of the process.
- The Home Office needs to publicise all relevant information on community cohesion policy as wide as possible and form links with all community organisations and NGOs.
- Culture is still not considered adequately in government policies and practices - nationally and locally. We seem to be faced with a philosophy of 'denial' as to what 'culture' is and how we understand it. A denial to address the issue. Consequently, not much has been done in order to understand the cultural differences and without that, one can not expect acknowledgement and respect for these differences and essential cultural diversity based on equality.

- SHRG started bringing up the issue of cultural diversity in 2000 during the preparatory process of the WCAR because we realised that the whole race relations field tends to concentrate and address colour but not culture. There was a somewhat implicit understanding that «your colour is fine but your culture...well, we'll have to think about it». No parity given to different cultures and no coherent policy (in a country like Britain where a number of different cultures have existed in the last 30-40 years) that could make the majority white population feel comfortable in the presence of different distinct cultures. This is so because there is very little space in race relations policy and approach for seriously considering 'culture' and cultural diversity.
- Southall is a very good example of an area where different distinct cultural communities co-exist. This has been the case for years now mainly due to the philosophy of these cultures and their willingness to co-exist in harmony that has led to the development of various tools to be used in order to avoid conflict and tensions in the area.
- It seems that all relevant reports (i.e Cattle, Ousley and others) have avoided to address 'culture' and the issues around that, while when they did, it was very brief and superficial.
- Need to raise these issues with the political parties and ask them how their policies and programmes address the cultural diversity of the British society.
- Another issue that needs to be discussed is that of 'Britishness' and 'Englishness'. It is a matter of great importance in the community cohesion discourse, especially the issue of civic citizenship and common values.
- The government has adopted the language of cohesion as a descriptor for a whole range of policy proposals. At this stage, however, it remains unclear what the government understands by social cohesion and what direct connections to this agenda can be envisaged for groups and individuals concerned with racial justice, and policy-makers with a responsibility for the promotion of racial equality.
- There is a significant danger that the community cohesion agenda will sacrifice action on the fundamental issues around 'race', citizenship, and belonging, for a managerial approach focusing on local government structures. It is only by tackling these larger questions that any coherence can be provided.
- It is crucial that the process should not obscure the centrality to the achievement of a progressive cohesive community of both eliminating racism and increasing respect for diversity.
- An attempt to combine a monocultural public realm with a multicultural private realm is likely to undermine the latter. For if only one culture is publicly recognised and institutionalised, other cultures will be seen as marginal, peripheral, even deviant and inferior.
- An alternative approach comes from the work of Bhikhu Parekh, «Membership of a political community entails [in New Labour terms] rights and responsibilities – entitlements and sacrifices. It is held together by a common sense of belonging». The components of this common sense of belonging are mutuality of claims and obligations of members that feel as part of a single community, fellow-feeling or a sense of concern for other members of the community and loyalty to the community or commitment to its integrity and well-being.
- The common sense of belonging is the basis and the defining feature of a community. It requires the following:
 - Some of its values are universally valid, morally compelling, and admit of no compromise while some others are distinctive to a community and form part of its cultural and moral identity;
 - Equal citizenship.
 - Since members of a political community often belong to different religious, cultural, ethnic and other communities, which are partly constitutive of their identity and matter much to them, the political community should respect their legitimate differences and allow them to express their identities in appropriate ways.
 - Familiarity with the community ways, for when one understands a community and knows one's way around it, one is likely to feel at home in it. This is a product of socialization.
 - Respect and fairness.
 - Being alert to challenges and finding ways of renewing or winning afresh the allegiance and loyalty of those in danger of becoming disaffected and detached.
- We need to ask ourselves how far the cohesion agenda faces the challenge of creating a common sense of belonging.