

## "Twilight World of Racial Hate"

*In many parts of England members of different ethnic communities live peacefully and harmoniously together. However, this is not always the case. It is hard to imagine the persecution sometimes suffered by families subjected to racist attacks. Part of the problem is that in some of the housing estates with a high concentration of black or Asian families, gangs of youths rampage out of control. White 'skinhead' youths have traditionally targeted Asians, but rival gangs of various national groups can make life hell in parts of London and other cities. — Ken Hyder, Observer, 14 May 1989, p. 9.*

5 Moyna Meah is a quiet man who says his prayers and keeps himself to himself. But five  
10 years of intense and persistent racial harassment have taken their toll. He is now  
unemployed, on long-term sickness benefit, suffering from heart trouble.  
His worries began in 1981, soon after the rest of his family arrived from Sylhet in  
Bangladesh. He had been working as a sewing machinist in the garment industry in  
15 London since 1963 and had never experienced the kind of harassment that was to cost him  
his health. But within weeks of moving into an Islington council flat, the family began to  
find out what it was like to become prisoners in their own home.  
Mr and Mrs Meah have a son, Kharsu, 24, and four daughters, Delwara, 18, Luthfa, 17,  
Sultana Begum, 11, and Amina, 7. The harassment began with the girls being hit and spat  
20 at by white teenagers — boys and girls — on the estate. In Sultana Begum's case the  
school became worried about her absences. A teacher and an Islington council officer  
volunteered to escort her to and from her school each day. But still the intimidation  
continued. Gangs of youths would spit, swear and jostle Mrs Meah and her children every  
time they left the house.  
Mr Meah's son's car has been smashed up at least half a dozen times, with the windscreen  
25 broken and the roof trampled on and dented. Their front door was always being kicked,  
smoke bombs were put through the letterbox and rubbish was dropped on to their balcony.  
The teenage tormentors then took to blocking the tenement passageway so that visitors  
could not reach the Meah home and the Meahs could not go out. On one occasion, Mrs  
Meah and her two eldest daughters were attacked as they tried to leave the house. The  
30 gang pulled their hair  
and grabbed at their throats and, when Mr Meah came out, they started kicking him.  
He said: 'I got high blood pressure. I was frightened. I couldn't sleep at night. I couldn't  
speak to the people who were doing this to us. I couldn't understand it. We had done  
nothing to them. And we were outnumbered. The trouble could happen at any time, day or  
35 night. It was totally unpredictable. I had no idea who could help us.'  
At that time, Islington council had set up a minders' scheme involving volunteers who  
would sit in with families vulnerable to racial attack. Sometimes it meant staying  
overnight and councillors and officers were active in the project. They stayed at the Meah  
home on several occasions. They called the police and the police would come and move  
40 on the bullies.  
At the same time, the council decided to help victims take out civil proceedings against  
attackers, by paying for solicitors. Some of the neighbours were supportive and agreed to  
act as witnesses, and two years ago the Meah family succeeded in having one of the  
ringleaders bound over.  
45 Since then the family has been left alone to get on with their life. Mr Meah said: 'Some of  
our neighbours have been very good to us and they tried to stop these things going on.  
After the court case, everything was peaceful. I am still sick because of the pressure, but  
my daughter can go to school now, and my wife can go shopping.'

Punch, 2 September 1981

*"I didn't like the way he  
wasn't looking at me."*



### Vocabulary

**twilight** (n.): the time when day is about to become night, so figuratively an area about which there is little information - **harassment** (n.): trouble caused by repeated attacks - **to take their toll**: to cost a lot in terms of health, life etc. - **garment** (n.): an article of clothing - **council flat** (n.): a flat owned by the local town council, to which rent is paid - **intimidation** (n.): frightening by making threats - **to jostle** (v.): to knock or push against roughly - **tormentor** (n.): a person who hurts others cruelly - **to take to** (v.): start - **tenement passageway** (n.): a corridor or balcony from which the front doors of the different flats can be reached - **minder** (n.): sm. employed to protect another person - **vulnerable** (adj.): not well protected, easy to attack - **councillor** (n.): an elected member of a council - **bully** (n.): a person who hurts or frightens weaker people - **to take out civil proceedings**: to start an action in law - **solicitor** (n.): a lawyer who works with the public and not only in court - **to have s. o. bound over** (v.): to get an order from a court to make s.o. stop causing trouble, under threat of punishment - **ringleader** ((I .)): leader of a group causing trouble

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1 Discuss the way gangs often choose victims to bully. What experience do you have of such behaviour?

### Comprehension

2 How was the Meahs' life in Islington made unbearable, and who was responsible?

3 What was done to help the Meahs, and by whom?

### Analysis

4 What sort of man is Mr Meah, and what was his life like until 1981?

5 Explain how the effects of the attacks on the Meahs go beyond what was actually done to them.

### Opinion

6 Try to imagine what reasons the attackers might give for what they did to the Meahs.

7 In what way does the type of housing estate they live in contribute to the difficulties?

### Projects

8 Imagine that a group of students at your school is picking on a person or group of people because they are 'different'. What could you do about it? Would your solution be applicable outside school to society in general?

9 Try to make ten statements deduced from what can be seen in the cartoon.