



## **Queering Solidarity: Asian European Activism in Partnership with Black Liberation Practices for Solidarity and Activism**

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### **Introduction**

From organising mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic; to demanding justice for Black lives taken by the state; to countering rising far-right white nationalism and xenophobia; activism by Black, Indigenous and communities of colour in Europe is expanding. The murder of George Floyd in summer 2020 sparked the UK's largest ever racial justice demonstrations, and resistance to right-wing party victories across Europe has been largely BIPOC<sup>1</sup>-led. As South Asian communities in Europe play increasing roles in social movements, diasporic Asian activists are examining how to build sustainable solidarity with other Black, Indigenous and communities of colour. Across multiple spaces, queer diasporic Asians are at the forefront of this work. This piece outlines best practices from some of these activists for organising and building solidarity.

As an organiser myself, with a decade of experience in QTPOC<sup>2</sup> activism and BIPOC solidarity work in the US, I was curious how South Asian organisers in the UK were interpreting activism, queerness, Asianness and solidarity in similar and different ways to the US. To explore this, I shadowed and interviewed queer South Asian and Indo-Caribbean activists and organisers in the UK involved with a variety of activist organisations, collectives and groups, from August 2019 to September 2020. In individual conversations and group meetings, we examined their histories of organising, activism and movement-building, and discussed their experiences in queer, BIPOC and diasporic South Asian communities. The organisations they work with are included in the appendix, and individual activists have been kept anonymous to protect their safety and their work.

What follows is a set of suggested practices for South Asian organising and solidarity in Europe, drawn from these UK-based conversations and from learnings in meetings, actions and events with these activists and their organisations. While these organisations do not represent the entirety of Asian<sup>3</sup> organising in the UK, and while there are many other groups not included here who also conduct mutual aid and organise around frontline needs or are less visible, the conversations with these organisers provide a start that we think is applicable to Asian organising across Europe. Each section of this piece outlines a practice that was expressed by multiple activists, and includes first-hand accounts of their experiences. Each section also includes a set of questions to guide you in applying the practices to your own work. These practices include growing Asian movement-building in the UK, queer identity and activism, and building solidarity between Asian and Black organisers.

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<sup>1</sup> BIPOC is an acronym meaning Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (where POC includes South Asian, East Asian, Southeast Asian, Arab, Latino/a/e and/or Hispanic, and other non-European descended peoples).

<sup>2</sup> QTPOC is an acronym standing for Queer and Trans People of Colour.

<sup>3</sup> In the UK, "Asian" often refers specifically to South Asians, due to migratory histories and other local dynamics. In most of this guide I have specified South Asians, but have retained where organisers themselves referred to South Asians as "Asians."

While most of these conversations were with queer South Asian organisers in the UK, we hope that this guide can provide suggestions for building powerful organising and solidarity in South, Southeast, and East Asian and broader BIPOC communities across Europe.

Here are the biggest lessons that South Asian activists and organisers shared.

## **1. Learn from our movement ancestors – their successes and their failures.**

All of the activists interviewed emphasised that South Asian organising in the UK is not new. Instead, they stressed that learning about this history was invaluable for situating their current movements within an historical context. Learning lessons from past South Asian organising efforts – in the UK and elsewhere – was key.

South Asian worker and anti-colonial movements like the Indian Tradeworkers Organisation (ITO) and the Indian Workers' Association date back to the early 1900s. One organiser with Sikh Socialists said, “my nanaji was really active with the Indian Tradeworkers organisation, which existed because the main unions were racist – I had to learn about that, and about things like the Grunwick strike, after his passing.”

Asian social movements in the UK grew in the 1970s and 1980s, as large numbers of South Asians immigrated particularly from South Asia and East Africa. In this time, South Asian immigrants were legally characterized as Black, were ghettoised into underfunded neighbourhoods across the UK alongside Afro-Caribbean immigrants, and were often violently targeted by white nationalist groups like the National Front. These shared experiences between Asian and Black British communities gave rise to the [Political Blackness movement](#). In this movement, which was documented extensively by scholar-activists like Ambalavener Sivanandan, Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah, South Asian and Black communities organized side by side against police brutality, deportations and other forms of state surveillance and violence. Political Blackness gave way to a wide spread of collectives, organisations, campaigns and movement groups, including the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs), the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), and many others.

While these movements had significant wins, particularly in stopping deportations and pushing back against white nationalist violence and police brutality, the movement fragmented in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely due to movements being coopted, depoliticised and funded by the state. Funding particularly pitted communities previously in solidarity, like South Asians and Afro-Caribbeans, against each other, as they competed for scarce resources. Debates at the time around multiculturalism, identity politics, representation versus shared politics, and the importance of separate organising based on ethnicity and racial community, further split groups apart.

When I spoke with current South Asian organisers, they emphasized the importance of learning from Political Blackness's successes, as well as its failures. As an activist with Sisters Uncut told me:

“We looked at Black feminist organising in the UK, groups like OWAAD (the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent), the Brixton Black Women's group, and Southall Black Sisters. The main thing that came out was how they had been successful and also how they'd fallen apart. When Black and Asian people came to the UK, they faced similar and interconnected forms of state violence – and people were building genuine solidarity. But they fell apart too: it was difficult to hold all that difference. And OWAAD was also a super homophobic coalition: lesbians

and bi people were told their identity was private...there was already a sense that anyone breaking out is doing so without reason.”

When thinking more deeply about its failures, this activist found that seeing South Asianness as both sharing some experiences with Black British communities, as well as occupying a distinct and different place in modern British society, allowed her to best act as an ally and a comrade in varying struggles, depending on the type of struggle and the activist space. For her, this recognition of shifting South Asian positionality, grounded in history, was key.

#### *Learning Solidarity and Positionality from Movement History*

Understanding this shifting positionality factored into how many British-Asian organisers described doing this work. As an organiser with CAPE (Campaign Against Prison Expansion) noted, “the focus of my work is abolition: that in itself is about white supremacy and specifically anti-Blackness so at the centre of the work is Black people and solidarity and Black peoples’ experience of criminalisation and incarceration.”

This meant that while she dedicated her work to prison abolition, she saw her role as both supporting Black leadership in organising, and in organising other Asians and Indo-Caribbeans to understand their roles in these movements.

Other activists mentioned finding important lessons within Political Blackness’s campaigns about British-Asians’ roles both in militant resistance and in complicity with the state. As an organiser with Misery noted:

“I think Political Blackness had its time and its place. For its failure, there’s an analysis that Brown people became richer and less radical: that narrative is there. But also, I think the people organising became complacent. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a QTPOC centre in Tottenham, but it shut down not because of funding cuts but because of demand and burnout. Organisers became placated by the state and by funding. But realising that there was a Black LGBT centre 20 years ago, why am I only finding out about it now, and what can I learn from why it didn’t continue?”

#### *Putting Ancestral History into Practice*

organisers also described learning from community and ancestral practices that were not explicitly political but could function as modes of movement-building. One activist noted, “In our festivals, taking sweets to someone’s house, there’s a politics of solidarity and love...as a queer of colour community, I want us to be in each other’s business in the ways that our grandmums are, that I heard you’re ill so I’m going to bring you garlic.”

Another noted, “I have to remember that I exist because my ancestors had the audacity to exist. Remembering my way forward feels integral to being a queer South Asian because we were queer before we were colonised.”

Learning from these histories of organising, activism and community solidarity can deeply inform our modern-day struggles. By learning from our histories, we can grow organising that feels distinctly South Asian, but that also gives rise to BIPOC solidarity that grows out of shared principles and shared experiences.

***Applying the Practice:*** reflect on histories of Asian activism in your own community. What can be uncovered? What do you still have to learn? Using this, what lessons can you garner from the past, or from ancestral practices of activism in your community’s homelands?

## 2. Build solidarity by repairing past wounds and putting multiracial organising into practice.

Many South Asian activists noted the fallout that Political Blackness had created in movement spaces, and the feeling that Asian activists had weaponized anti-Blackness to profit from white supremacy. As an activist with Lesbian and Gays Support the Migrants (LGSM) noted, “In terms of Political Blackness having come and gone, it’s related to Asian investment in capitalist structures and wealth creation. It’s not solidarity, it’s networking – you want to help your cousin out to make your family’s life easier, so you don’t help the Black person next to you because they’re not Apne (*ours*).”

But some activists felt that debates about Political Blackness or South Asian stakes in racial justice organising – particularly on the internet – could quickly devolve into overly intellectual fights that lacked accountability to organising on the ground. More recent discussions around Afro-Pessimism – a school of thought popularized by Frank Wilderson and other Black scholars and activists that emphasises the unique experience of global anti-Blackness through slavery, institutional racism and violence against Black people across diaspora and across Africa – have enhanced these debates. Alongside rising wealth in some South Asian communities, this climate has created a distrust of solidarity that builds on the fragmentation of Political Blackness. Instead of leaning into difficult community discussions, this historical distrust often bubbles over into further fragmentation online. As an activist with Preventing PREVENT said:

“The chat about political blackness is [often] a lightning rod for a set of arguments about racial hierarchy. What we’re seeing in Britain is a fight between a kind of Afro-Pessimism and the idea of multiracial solidarity. That fight is being organized around the term Political Blackness. But instead, what if we have a conversation about the viability of multiracial organising?”

Instead, Asian activists can guide these conversations, both in-person and digitally, through political education in our own communities, as a precursor to understanding solidarity. Emphasising the political power of multicultural organising, or organising across cultures and race based on shared targets and shared experiences, can yield generative spaces about what we can do together that both hold difference and cultivate disciplined multiracial solidarity.

An organiser with Misery agreed, saying:

“Two to three years ago, I think there was a moment of time of me and my radical Brown friends suddenly challenging each other on anti-Blackness, in a one-upping, I’m going to correct you, way. In a beautiful way, but it became a hierarchy, I’m a better activist, more virtuous, pious, right. But instead, how we show up now is with that accountability piece, extending that to your family, and whether it’s about disability justice, anti-Blackness, everything, it’s, show up for your friends.”

Thinking more about disability justice, they expanded that showing up doesn’t have to only mean turning out to protests. Misery enumerates ways that activists can support in other ways, from online political education and meetings, to moving funds, to conversations with community members, to everyday acts that cultivate mutual aid and support in our neighbourhoods.

*Black and South Asian Solidarity in Action*

An activist with Sikh Socialists described solidarity in action:

“BLM was a turning point. We thought, we need to be doing something on the ground, it’s not enough to tweet out a different narrative. So, we decided to deliver things like hand sanitiser and food packs in a pack at BLM protests. It was significant that our first action as a group on the ground was specifically an act of solidarity with Black people because it would be a glaring omission not to.”

An organiser with Sisters Uncut, a women and non-binary organising space, described how Sisters had chosen to lift up cases of harm against Black women at the hands of the state or due to state negligence. For example, the death of Sarah Reed, a young Black woman, in Holloway Prison, and the eviction of Sistah Space, a Black-led domestic violence support centre, from their office. While South Asian activists participated in this multiracial organising, they particularly centred Black women because, as they said, “it’s been a movement led throughout its history by Black women, so [we’re] taking a back seat, letting others lead, learning more.”

Other activists described South Asian organising in response to Grenfell, where Asians were galvanised but organising happened in multiracial formation. A Preventing PREVENT organiser stated, “If you go on the silent walk outside of Grenfell, there’s plenty of Black people there, and plenty of Asian people there, but there’s Turkish people, Algerian people, Filipino people, white people there too – it’s politics where Asians are organising but it’s multiracial, and in the end, it’s about class.” She described Asian presence in movements through language exchanges, shutdowns, direct actions and rallies – and emphasised the presence of Asians through organising that confronted daily experiences of class and racialisation.

An organiser in queer Desi spaces described the importance of putting movement building into practice in ways that resonated with her own experience. She told me, “Me being kicked out of my own house here, jumping around in London, meeting so many trans and queer friends in housing instability and structural poverty, I felt, getting people jobs or a system that pays their rent, that is something that I really can contribute to in the next month or 6 years.” For her, these tangibles are what meaningfully yield organising and solidarity: our movements must work to figure out what tangibles that we can fight for and win.

***Applying the Practice:** note down what you know about the experiences of Asians in your diaspora community. How can your community learn from group reflection? What shared experiences across race and communities can spark solidarity and shared action? Where can your community step back, learn from others and follow other groups’ lead?*

### **3. Asian diaspora identity is broad. Hold space for difference.**

Asian communities – including South Asian communities – are vast, and differences within Asian communities can create divisions in organising spaces. Lines of power and privilege exist along class divisions and access to wealth, national borders, faith communities, caste, linguistic and cultural differences, and more. In bridging these gaps, activists described how they identified shared values and shared identities to create shared movements, while recognizing and working through tensions and difference. As one organiser said,

“I grew up in a really Brown area, my school was 50% Black & Brown and 50% white, but looking at my mom, not speaking English, not being integrated, being broke, I saw that as a class thing. And I get so pissed off – full of compassion now, but so pissed off – at South Asian organisers who suddenly found racism is a thing

in university, but like, you have servants at home, maybe start talking about that. For me it's about class."

But when she reflected on her organising journey in Asian spaces, she said, "my South Asian organising came out through my queerness, from a party I went to! I'm friends with all those people now, and was then, but I think what has stopped it at moments is, we don't necessarily have the same united struggle as South Asians."

To build wider Asian movements, activists described leaning into politics rooted in shared experience in the UK. As another organiser noted:

"I feel a strong connection to the history of the Asian Youth Movements, organised around Punjabi, Pakistani, Bangladeshi communities and Indians together. This was neighbourhood-based, anti-imperialist, radical, coalitional-based in solidarity, incredibly creative and vibrant."

The AYMs did not dissolve differences between South Asians with varied national and cultural contexts, and held space for multiple viewpoints and histories to inform diverse strategies. Instead of homogenising Asia, the AYMs provide a lesson for how neighbourhood-based local organising can open space for Asian unity based on shared experience.

Activists with Sisters Uncut emphasised how Black and Brown feminist spaces embraced differences in organising ideologies and strategies that other spaces often overlooked. As one activist said, "In white feminist spaces, I wasn't hearing abolition, anarchism, even dismantling hierarchy, just the "lean in" feminism type stuff. I'd look around and be the only brown person here."

Another Sisters activist agreed, saying, "In many spaces, people weren't including Muslim women in their feminism, nor migrant women, nor colonialism in their feminism, and I felt unwelcome in those spaces." But centring BIPOC feminism held space for differences that allowed these activists to feel welcomed:

"Then I went to a Sisters Uncut meeting, and there were way more Black and Brown people and nonbinary people in the room, and we read the safer spaces policy, and the fact that they were naming hierarchy and Islamophobia and transphobia, to help people feel included and name that they're real, that was really powerful to me."

While no space is perfectly inclusive, naming the contexts of power and privilege allowed these activists to feel welcomed, to lift up spaces for growth, and collaboratively cultivate a stronger and broader movement space.

***Applying the Practice:** note down the fractures between Asian communities in your context. What elements of identity, connection, values or ideology can you invoke to unite across these fractures? When is it important to come together across different Asian identities, and when can meaningful work be achieved separately but in parallel?*

#### **4. Envision the futures you are working towards. Dream collectively, articulate alternatives and enact tangible steps to make it happen.**

In each of the spaces where I spoke with South Asian organisers and activists, having a clear vision of the world we're working towards was a core part of the strategy. For LGSM, it is a world without borders. For Sisters Uncut, it's the anti-carceral, abolitionist world described in their [Feministo](#). For Misery, it's a world where queer and trans mental health is prioritized. In all of these groups, these visions for the world we're trying to build were created in community. Groups used consensus

decision-making to iterate versions of their visions, and built them in largely multiracial formations, led by the dreams of largely queer people of colour.

An organiser with Misery told me about how their visions for their world interact with the work they do with QTPOC, “Colonialism, capitalism, fucked us all up, we have to break it down, and there’s this fear piece that stops a lot of solidarity work...[but] maybe queerness brings down capitalism, stops the economy, [Black and] Brown people have to wake up to the fact that we’re all broke.” By envisioning a world where Black and Brown queerness can powerfully disrupt capitalist and colonialist extractive structures, Misery’s Asian and Black organisers articulate the tools that QTPOC need to get us there, and the importance of mental health in that process.

At Sisters and CAPE, an organiser emphasised the importance of feminist abolitionism within these processes, led by Black and Brown communities. She noted, “learning about abolition, how to dismantle these structures and build something new, gave me a new focus that was more than just fighting something that was never for us.” She contrasted this to modes of organising where she had focused purely on breaking down the status quo: instead, fighting for something that was for Black and Brown people reinvigorated her commitment to organising.

### *Dreaming and Faith*

In addition to dreaming a world that dismantles capitalism and colonialism, Misery organisers noted the importance of faith in this process. Rather than focus on the negative, they emphasised, “spirituality plays a big part in this...[not] religion, but... how do we build in this spiritual element, my queerness and my radicalism are so inherently spiritual.” Thus, by centring the power of queer Black and South Asian dreams and spiritualities together, these organisers and activists are able to shape a world that our communities don’t merely react to but that we want to build towards, together.

***Applying the Practice:*** *think about your upcoming meetings and organising timeline. How can you create more space for dreaming together? What activities and time can you prioritise to open up imaginations and let your people vision what you DO want, alongside what you DON’T want?*

## **5. Queer what activism and solidarity mean: centre community, care, healing and intimacy.**

### *Finding Intimacy*

From Sisters Uncut, to LGSM, to DesiQ, a large number of BIPOC organising spaces in the UK are led by or supported by queer South Asians. Across conversations, queer South Asian activists and organisers emphasised the importance of queering the way we think about activism. For them, this included centring deep relationships rather than tactical alliances and moving at a slower speed that allows trust and community to grow organically, rather than fast-paced, funding-driven campaigns that often result in commodification of queer and BIPOC labour, disproportionate white cis male leadership, and activist burnout.

When I spoke with a South Asian member of LGSM about this, they told me, “Many of us have lost support networks, so we have to make our own. We have to care for one another as a point of principle. With the dangers that we face – homelessness, mental health – we can’t lose each other. So that’s what we think of as activism, really.”

In thinking about applying this to South Asian organising specifically, and South Asian movement-building with Black activists, they noted, “the kinship systems that we have in South Asia are modelled on heteronormative structures and heteronormativity...so having more queer South

Asian spaces grows a different form of culture, that lets us access [the] liberation and solidarity that we need.”

Similarly, an organiser with Misery described their movement work as not just oriented around campaigns but also as a way of “finding intimacy,” “coming into my queerness and bringing it together with race,” and “finding the people and groups that I was trying to find and unearth in myself.” Through centring these relationships, we undo the burnout culture of the non-profit industrial complex, and we slow down to move at a speed that is sustainable and – at best – joyful.

#### *Community Care, Self-Care, Relationship and Solidarity*

She also emphasised the importance of ensuring systems of community care, especially in protecting mental health, reflecting:

“I thought the work I wanted to do was very frontline, but where I’m at and my mental health, it’s too triggering and traumatic. So then, am I not revolutionary? But finding care work, meeting Leah Lakshmi, Mia Mingus – I think it’s maybe romanticised that trans is revolutionary, but living in a world that wants you dead, supporting that survival is a radical act.”

In supporting this survival, Misery runs sober QTPOC parties and, during the lockdown, online mental health circles and workshops where queers of colour learn tools like community herbalism, meditation and liberation through BDSM.

In these spaces, solidarity between Black and Asian activists grows naturally, through systems of sharing, support and care. As organisers reflected, “in neoliberal organising solidarity becomes this process, this thing. But really, it’s about I want to feel love, and I love you, and I want to feel intimacy, and it is protests, and showing up, but at the end of the day it’s we want to feel human, and we want to feel loved.” Ultimately, as these organisers emphasised, care, relationship and love create the most fruitful grounds for solidarity and racial justice.

*Applying the Practice: What systems of care exist in your organising? What systems of care can you build? How can different community members access your work? How are you growing trust and deep relationships? What does it look like to slow down and check in?*

### **Connecting the Dots**

While these testimonials draw from experiences of activists in one particular country’s context, many of these lessons can hold true across contexts. To organise in our present, we have to understand our past – and we can learn from the lessons of our activist ancestors. To organise across communities, we have to first understand our divisions – and then identify what we share. We have to be ready to reckon with generational trauma, pain and harm: and then find ways to move through it together. We have to learn solidarity that happens through actions, not just through words. We have to be brave enough to dream, to imagine a world where our communities – Asian, Black, working-class, immigrant – have a different, better future. And to dream together, we must hold deep relationships. Organising in Asian diaspora is lifelong work, so our movements need systems of care and intimacy that hold us together in moments of crisis. To do all this, we have to get to know our people – and be ready to lean into each other. Like one activist said, our grandmothers knew how to do this: we only have to remember.

## Appendix

The queer South Asian activists and organisers interviewed in this piece come from and work with a variety of movement organisations, community organising groups, collectives and other spaces. We encourage you to check out their websites and social media to learn about these groups' important organising and find even more practices for Asian diaspora organising. These groups include:

- [Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants \(LGSM\)](#), a UK-wide queer anti-deportation direct action collective;
- [Sisters Uncut](#), a women, trans, and non-binary-led abolitionist direct action collective that organises against austerity, for racial justice, and to protect services for survivors of domestic violence;
- [Preventing PREVENT](#), a network of groups fighting Islamophobic UK governmental anti-terror policies, particularly in schools and universities;
- [Campaign Against Prison Expansion \(CAPE\)](#), a UK-wide prison abolition organising group;
- [Misery](#), a QTPOC healing justice and mental health collective;
- [Sikh Socialists UK](#), an online collective of leftist Sikh activists;
- [Healing Justice London](#), an organisation that centres transformative and disability justice;
- [UK Black Pride](#), an annual celebration of queer Black people and people of colour;
- [Gendered Intelligence](#), a trans-led charity and organisation in the UK;
- [Nijjor Manush](#), a Bengali and Bangladeshi organising collective in the UK;
- [Cradle Collective](#), a collective of facilitators, organisers and educators, primarily of colour;
- [The London Renters Union](#), a union of people living in rented accommodation across London;
- [Wretched of the Earth](#), a Black, Indigenous and people of colour climate justice collective;
- [Working on Our Power \(WOOP\)](#), a capacity-building and training group for women of colour and non-binary and trans people of colour in Europe.

This is not a comprehensive list of organising and activist groups in the South Asian community in the UK; many other groups exist, across community, faith, neighbourhood and other spaces. Many of these groups are active in London, have younger membership, and have large digital presence. We recognize that much can be gained from groups outside urban areas, from older generations, and with other practices of organising; please share with us what other experiences you have in your community!

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