

BENGALIS IN EAST LONDON: *A Community in the Making for 500 Years*

In The Beginning...

Today, some 53,000 of the UK's 200,000-300,000 Bengalis live in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and the Brick Lane area lies in the heart of this community.

It all began with spices. *At a time when pepper was dearer than gold, saffron more rare than diamonds...*¹ Sea links and overland routes established in Roman times to India and China fed a growing European appetite for spices. Condiments such as pepper livened up winter foods stored in brine. Cloves offered relief for toothache or, in times of inadequate sanitation, masked body odours. Aromatic woods such as cinnamon were used for perfumes, medicines and flavourings. And textiles such as silks were imported from as far as China and Japan.

Such was the importance of the trade that when Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks in 1453, new trading interfaces were provided. While trade was dominated by Venice, countries such as Portugal and Spain began to explore sea routes with the force of guns and a passionate Christian zeal. The Portuguese established trading points in Malacca, Goa and Macao, the latter port being set up under the tolerance of a Chinese state which itself had trading posts as far off as Kenya.

But by 1580, Portuguese and Spanish control of the seas was waning. Protestant Holland and Britain entered the trade race. Following in the footsteps of explorers such as Francis Drake, early traders in the East Indies raised finances and negotiated a charter with Queen Elisabeth I to create London's *Company of Merchants*, on the 31st of December 1599.

The first fleet of four ships set off from Woolwich in early 1601 to Bantam, a key trading port in Sumatra. In 1608, the first British ship reached the shores of Surat in India and between 1602 and 1833, some 4600 East India Company ships followed suite².

The first East India Company dock was built in 1614 near the present day Tower Hamlets Council Town Hall in Blackwall. Dockyards, warehouses, foundries, saw mills and cordage works grew to meet the needs of the new international shipping industry over the next century, creating a natural demand for the migration of cheap labour from India. A parallel growth of factories along the coast of India also created a need for employees to administrate this operation.

¹ *Sandy Tosvig, Today Programme, February 2003*

² *Trading Places, Anthony Farrington, The British Library, 2002*

A majority of Indians arriving in the early eighteenth century were sailors employed by the East India Company or the British merchant navy. Ayahs - nannies or maid-servants - and 'man servants' also arrived in growing numbers with families returning from India. Many would have been Bengali, as Calcutta was one of the East India Company's original trade sites³. The roots of immigration, exchange and trade between Britain and the state of Bengal can therefore be directly traced to the creation of the East India Company.

Local Connections

By 1654, funded through deductions from local seamen's wages, St. Matthias Church was built for pensioners and the inhabitants of Poplar opposite present day Tower Hamlets College. The church structure is all the more remarkable as the old masts of ships were used as arch supports for the entire building. Tombstones of East India Company managers still dot its floors.

A Sylheti connection was also established when the Revenue Collector for the province, Robert Lindsay, was sent in 1777 by the Company to collect revenues from local *zamindar* landlords. When a local riot grew against home rule erupted, Lindsay shot a *Pir Zada* – a Holy Man – at the local Shah Jalal mosque. Needless to say, his popularity with local Muslims plummeted.

One consequence was that Syed Ullah, son of one of the *Pir Zada*'s followers, travelled to Britain to seek revenge on Lindsay. Syed met Lindsay on the street of his village and, according to local lore, was invited back to cook what might have been the first curry served by a Sylheti chef in Britain⁴. Whether Syed had a change of heart or simply failed in his ambition to poison Lyndsey, we will never know....

20th Century Sylheti Migration

One seaman speculates that because Sylheti descendants of the venerated Shah Jalal and his 360 followers from Yemen had fallen on hard times, it was more desirable to go abroad as labourers than to be seen doing manual work at home⁵. Certainly, it helped to have Sylheti *serangs* in Calcutta who were responsible for finding ship crews and often found them amongst men from their own birthplaces.

Sylheti lascars were frequently stokers on steam liners, with many dying from heat stroke, exhaustion or throwing themselves overboard in desperation⁶. Conditions on ships were harsh, with cramped quarters, insufficient fresh food, fresh air or clothing for colder climates.

³ *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*, Rozina Visram, Pluto Press, 1986

⁴ *ibid*

^x *ibid* pg 12

⁶ *ibid* pg 22

Lascar monument at Tower Hill: Opposite the Tower of London, a Monument commemorates British Merchant Seamen who lost their lives in two World Wars. Count the names of seamen of Bengali origins such as Miah, Latif, Ali or Uddin on these plaques for ships originating from all over Britain. But do note that these named individuals only represent the privileged few Bengalis employed as British crew members excluding some 4-5000 lascars who died at sea and whose names were never known. Indian records show a total of 6,000 Indian seamen killed at war, a large proportion of whom would have been Sylhetis.

Employed at $1/7^{\text{th}}$ of the normal rate for seamen, Lascars trapped in the engine rooms suffered a particularly high casualty rate. Official tables exclude lascars amongst the names of 26,833 killed, despite 50,000 of 190,000 crew members at war being 'lascars'⁷.

Tower Hill: Now incorporated into the Queen Mother's Crown, the *Kohi-Noor* (*Mountain of Light*) diamond, one of the largest in the world, fell into the hands of the East India Company in the 19th century and was presented as a gift to Queen Victoria. It is said to carry a curse, as all the male owners of the diamond suffered terrible fates.

Continue walking up through Trinity Place and down Cooper's Road before turning into the courtyard of xx hotel to the square featuring an ancient Roman Wall for the City of London. Behind this lies the back of the Toc H hostel.

Toc H Hostel: Originally a Norwegian Seaman's hostel, Toc-H acquired No. 7 the Crescent in 1937 to help develop activities for disillusioned WWI veterans to re-build new faith. In 1973, under the guidance of Peter East, the hostel opened its doors to 25 young Bengali men, mostly students and low-waged workers in Brick Lane's rag trade. Along with youth projects such as the Brick Lane-based Avenues Unlimited, Toc-H offered what was probably the first 'community' forum for young Bengalis of this generation to discuss issues affecting their lives.

In 1978, it was the murder of resident Altab Ali which ultimately mobilised Bengalis to protest against an increasing number of racist attacks. Numerous Bengali youth and community organizations emerged after this time with input from Toc-H residents, several of whom went on to become Tower Hamlets' first Bengali councillors.

On the other side of the Crescent lies the London Guildhall University site where Master Mariners course degrees can be obtained.

The First Lascar Lodgings: Travelling further back in time, the numbers of lascars left on the streets by shipping agents returning from India had led to acrimonious debate. A memo in 1782 from the East India Company complains of lascars finding their way to the head office in Leadenhall Street 'having been reduced to great distress and

⁷ ibid pg 32

applying to us for relief'.⁸ By the end of the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800's there were as many as 1,100 lascars in London at any one time, and by the early 1850's, some forty 'sons of India' were found dead of cold and hunger on the streets of East London⁹.

The East India Company initially refused responsibility for transporting them home, but by 1801, was forced to set up 'reception centres' - in the same vein, perhaps, as those set up today for asylum seekers - first in Shoreditch, then Shadwell and the Ratcliffe Highway.

A visit in 1814 to the barrack in Wapping, further down the Highway, found two or three hundred sailors ill-fed, badly treated, whipped, short of bedding and winter clothes while living on earth floors of unheated and overcrowded rooms. Evidence of poor treatment, was refuted by East India Company Directors on the basis that discipline for up to 1600 lascars in overcrowded conditions was necessary. A high death rate amongst lascars and ill-health was attributed to an '*innate sloth and filthy habits of the men which defy every attempt to remedy it*'.¹⁰

One account in Wapping, tells of an Indian girl who boarded ship for England with a sailor in 1855, was taken to *the most disreputable house in Ratcliffe Highway, abandoned, cast out on the streets and ended up in the Whitechapel workhouse.*

The yearly death rate of some 130 to 260 lascars dying from neglect in the streets, led to the creation of the Society for the Protection of Asiatic Sailors. By 1855, the Society had set up the '*Stranger's Home*' in a building now occupied by Limehouse Police Station, to shelter lascars and help them find a safe passage home.

... walk down Pepys Street, past 'Mariner House' and up to Hart Street to arrive at St Olave's Church

Early Death and Burial Records of Asians in the City: The earliest records of Asians in Britain include the baptism, in the presence of Aldermen and the Lord Mayor in December 1616, of an East Indian from the Bay of Bengal, christened '*Peter*'. The name itself was chosen by King James I¹¹. Between 1638 and 1682, St. Olave's Church in the City of London makes mention of three baptisms and two burials of Indians. Buried in a vault beneath the communion table of this church also lie Mother Goose (1586), Samuel Pepys (1703) and 365 victims of the plague in 1665.

... Up New London Street, cut across Fenchurch Station... and stop at the East India Arms pub...

⁸ *ibid* pg 17

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid* pg 42

¹¹ *Asians in Britain*, Rozina Visram, Pluto Press, 2002

The East India Arms: Operating from nearby Leadenhall Street in the City of London, where its offices were erected in 1726, the East India Company transported employees, ranging from senior merchants to lawyers and theatre performers to India. Given a cheap source of labour for seamen and ‘ayahs’, or maidservants and children’s nannies, India soon came to be recognised as a cheap, and in the case of domestics, a ‘fashionable’ source of labour.

Following the construction from 1769 of company warehouses in nearby *Cutler’s Gardens*, the East India Company also built *East India Warehouses* on Fenchurch Street. Running from the junction of Leadenhall Street to the *East India Arms*, a public house used by warehouse personnel, these warehouses were used to store tea and other trade goods until the site was sold to Lloyd’s Register, financiers for much of the Empire’s shipping trade, in 1898.

.... *Continue right on Fenchurch Street and stop at the corner of Jewry Street....*

Jewry Street: By the late 1800’s, socially conscious Mr. and Mrs. Roger at 6 Jewry Street set up an ‘Ayah’s Home’ for homeless women. The home also acted as one of the first ‘employment centres’ in Britain, where ayahs waiting for return passages could meet prospective employers.

As servants were largely brought at the convenience of their British employers, they were often abandoned upon arrival either to beg in the streets or to find overcrowded lodgings in East London. As flogging, beatings and ill-treatment were not uncommon, those lascars who were not abandoned by shipping companies simply jumped ship to avoid such treatment.¹² It was not uncommon to find between fifty and sixty ayahs cramped in one house. By the late 1869’s when the Missionary, Joseph Salter, estimated some one to two hundred Ayahs visited London each year, and Hindustani Professor Syed Abdoolah reckoned some 900 Indian lascars, rising to thousands during the Napoleonic Wars¹³, were on the streets.

Ironically, Jewry Street itself takes its name from 13th century pogroms following the expulsion of Jews from Britain, which also saw their massacre at the Tower of London. Other streets intersecting Jewry Street such as India and Burma Street, on the other hand, reflect Britain’s colonial past.

... *note the stone marking the original location of the Aldgate where Chaucer lived and wrote*

Aldgate Gatehouse: Just as Chaucer’s wrote from his Aldgate gatehouse of the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381 which saw riots in Brick Lane against local Flemish weavers,

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

racial tensions accompanied the arrival of Asian people in Shoreditch, further north of Aldgate. Magistrates complained of *'the nuisance occasioned by the men living so near the city as Shoreditch'* where the East India Company set up its first lodging centre for lascars.

...looking over to St Botolph's Church, named after the patron saint of traveler and now a hostel for homeless men...

St. Botolph's Church: Death and burial notices in Church records mention a man in 1618 by the name of 'James' – *'an Indian servant to Mr James Duppa Brewer'* – buried in St. Botolph's Church, Aldgate. Four centuries later, Aldgate also became known because of the generosity – or financial prowess – of women like *'Lascar Sally'* who reputedly offered 'group rates' to Bengali seamen who together sought the solace of female company.

In 1700, Aldgate was also mentioned in relation to *'A slender middle-sized India Black, in a dark grey Livery went away from Mrs Thwait's in Stepney, the 4th of June, and is supposed to be gone on Board some ship in the Downs; whosoever secures and gives notice of him to Mrs Thwait's or Mr Tresham, two doors within Aldgate shall have ten shillings reward and reasonable charges'*

... carry on through Aldgate, headed east, noting Raines School across the road....

Raines Foundation: Across the road lays the legacy of the charitable efforts of Mr Henry Raines, a successful brewer who in 1717, decided to give 'part of his substance' to build a 'commodious school for the education of 50 boys and 50 girls from the parish of St George's in the East.

...before entering the underground passage on the corner of Aldgate High Street, look down Mansell Street towards Goodman's Fields...

Goodman's Fields: While most Asians were free men and women, stories of cruel treatment were also commonplace, as described in a notice of 1707 which reads: *'Went away from his Master yesterday morning at 4 O'clock, an East Indian Boy, nam'd Caesar, about the age of 16, wearing his own short hair He has a handsome face and is tall for his age. Whoever takes him up and brings him to Mr John Waterhouse's, in Aylif Street, Goodman's Fields, shall have ten shillings reward.'*

Former Leather Warehouse on Mansell Street: The success of 20th century leather traders in the Aldgate area is sometimes under-pinned by a rise in real estate prices. One such example is illustrated in the case of Mr. M.A. Aktar, who rose from humble beginnings as a *'Hoffman presser'* with a local Jewish clothing merchant to become a major producer in the leather business. In 1986, Mr. Aktar finally sold off his warehouse on the corner of Alie and Mansell Street to a property developer for 1 1/2 million pounds.

... go under the passage and come up through *Brahman Street*, noting the street name reference which might be linked to the Indian sub-continent...

Calcutta House: Now part of London Metropolitan University, Calcutta House in Old Castle Street was once a tea warehouse whose name refers to the capital of West Bengal.

... carry on through to the other edge of Aldgate roundabout....

Gardner's Corner: On the far end of Aldgate, Gardener's store was famous as a supplier of sailor's uniforms and clothing for officers in the Marines. In 1936, Gardner's Corner was also the meeting point for protesters who later fought in '*The Battle of Cable Street*' against Oswald Mosley's 'Brown Shirts' whose name reflected that of the 'Black Shirt' youths of fascist Germany. This corner of Aldgate has more recently been known as 'Roy's Corner' after a Cypriot man who owned much of the real estate in this area.

.. from the corner of *Commercial Road* and *Whitechurch Street*, a few adjacent areas worth noting include:

Cafes and Customers: By one account, there were 20 so-called 'Indian' restaurants in London by 1946. Off nearby Alie Street also lies the *Halal Restaurant* opened in 1939, reputedly the first Asian restaurant in the area. Amongst the first coffee houses offering curries in East London was one adjacent to the first East London Mosque, opened in 1941 at 448 Commercial Road and another in Whitechurch Street. Moktar Ali's café on Cable Street was also a key meeting place for local Bengali seamen seeking company and support, as was a café, now demolished, on 118 Commercial Street.

A Punjabi café in Backchurch Street, recently demolished, also holds a place of importance as the place where Jinnah came to secure a vote of confidence for his future government of Pakistan from what was then the *East Bengali* community in East London.

.... down *Whitechurch Street*....

First Seeds of Asian Businesses: Mr. Said Amir Shah of Shah Brothers, silk merchants and warehousemen at No. 8 Whitechurch Lane, also acted as a film agent and contractor for Asian film extras to meet a growing demand in the 1940's¹⁴.

Further down the road in 1956, Haji Taslim Ali, whose family, friends and grand-daughter now run the undertakers' service at Whitechapel's East London Mosque, became Imam of the East London Mosque. He also opened the first local halal butcher's in 1940.

¹⁴ Asians in Britain – pg 259

By this time, the community of Sylheti residents in London had grown to around 300. But the real push came in 1956 when the existing community of seamen was joined by another 2-3000 adventurers, such that Nawab Ali, who owned a coffee shop at 11 Settles Street, near the Labour Exchange, says ‘they just used to show up with my name in a taxi – at one point, my wife went crazy – there were 35 of them living upstairs!’¹⁵ Later, Nawab Ali also had a gambling club – the Commonwealth Club – in Umberston Street, and a butcher’s shop in Hessel Street, now run by his son.

Or Aftab Ali with a picture of one of his two sons who were both shot down by Nazi forces when their parachutes got caught in trees on mission. Mr. Ali also lost two houses in Watney Market when they were bombed by enemy forces.

Altab Ali Park: Racist attacks and poor housing provisions for Bengalis date back to the time of lascars living in Shoreditch. But the reaction of the Bengali community to waves of racist attacks in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, came to a head once again in 1978.

An announcement of plans to house Bengali residents in ‘ghetto’ estates off Brick Lane led to an upsurge of racial tensions. Rampages of ‘mobs of youth’ who smashed windows, daub walls with racist graffiti and carried out attacks culminated both in the murder of young rag trade worker, Altab Ali, near the park named after him. The park is now a venue for anti-racist festival and protests against injustice and oppression. Also buried in the park is Richard Brandon, the executioner reputed to have beheaded Charles I.

Anti-racists organised protests such as sit-ins at the crossroads of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road where the National Front Party sold racist literature on Sundays. Local youth groups were also set up to address issues of concern. *Bengali Youth Movement, Progressive Youth Organisation, Bangladeshi Youth Front and Bengali Youth League*, to name a few, were inspired by activists, many of whom have gone on to become councilors in Tower Hamlets.

Shahid Minar: A Shahid Minar, or ‘*Martyr’s Monument*’ imitating a larger one in Dhaka, Bangladesh, was also erected on this site. It commemorates the deaths of *Language Martyrs* in Bangladesh, who died in 1952 protesting against the then West Pakistan dictate for schoolchildren to study in Urdu rather than in their native Bengali language.

Along Whitechapel High Street, past the Whitechapel gallery, which can be referred to as well...

Whitechapel Art Gallery: Canon and Henrietta Barnet founded the Whitechapel Art Gallery whose purpose was to bring culture to the people of East London. They also founded Toynbee Hall (*see below*)

... you could cut down Half Moon Passage or simply past the atmospheric Anarchists Bookshop in Freedom Alley....while refreshments could be had at the Gallery, it might be best to wait for the Arts Café at Toynbee which also offers a courtyard area where people who might not wish to spend on refreshments can sit comfortably...otherwise, you can stand by the back courtyard of Toynbee before continuing on Wentworth Street...

Toynbee Hall: By the 1960's, it became clear that Bengali seamen were unable to communicate and function effectively within the British bureaucratic system. Toynbee Hall, a university settlement found in 1884 by Oxford graduates Canon and Henrietta Barnett for voluntary social education in the East End, became one of several key venues for Bengali community educational initiatives.

English language classes and cultural activities were developed here for Pakistani seamen by groups such as the *Council of Citizens' of Tower Hamlets* and the *Afro-Asian Society*. Toynbee Hall, had also seen the drafting in 1939 of plans for the Welfare State by William Beveridge, was home to Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the place from which research into the area by Charles Booth of Salvation Army fame was mobilized.

... cut through Toynbee down to Wentworth Street to the corner of Brick Lane. It might be good to stop opposite where the pavement is wider ...

Brick Lane and Banglatown: Home to immigrant communities over centuries, Brick Lane has also been a centre for political interests. In 1484, Richard III declared it illegal for aliens to work in the City of London, leading to the creation of new communities in Spitalfields. The Irish community in Spitalfields was targeted for disturbances against the Irish in 1736 and again during the Gordon riots in the 1780's. Riots against the Huguenot settlers are also recorded in the 18th century.

More recent immigrants include German anarchist and organizer of the Yiddish Workers' Association, Rudolph Rocker from 1884, publishers newspaper '*Abeter Frainit*', (*the Little Jew*) which was distributed locally for forty years. In 1907, nearby Fulbourne Street was the venue for a meeting which saw the creation of the Bolshevic Party in 1907 by exiled Russian Social Democrats including Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. The latter was also a lodger at the Tower House hostel on Fieldgate Street. The first discussions about the creation of a separate country for Israel also took place in an international working men's club off Canon Street Road. And in the late 1960's, discussion was also taking place in the Brick Lane area amongst East Pakistani settlers about the welfare of their homeland and about the possibility of breaking away from West Pakistan.

Brick Lane has come to be seen as synonymous with all-things Bengali. Festivals such as the Baishakhi Mela – Bengali New year festival – and British-Bengali bands emerging from the area such as *Joi – 'Victory'* in Bengali– or members of *Asian Dub Foundation*, highlight the cultural contributions of Bengalis to the area.

In 1997 Tower Hamlets Council formally declared Brick Lane and the surrounding area as 'Banglatown' in recognition of the strong cultural influence the local Bengali community has had as it entered a new millennium.

Sweet & Spicy: converted from a pub in 1969 by Mr. Ikram Butt of Lahore, this café is famed for its posters of Pakistani wrestlers – some of which feature the café owner himself from his days as a former sportsman.

Naz Restaurant: The Naz Restaurant rose to prominence when a bomb exploded on its doorstep in 1999 as part of a series of racist and homophobic attacks in London. Opened as the *Mayfair*, a Jewish cinema in the 1930's, the Naz went on to show Hindi Films in the 1960's and was visited by stars such as Dilip Kumar, the Clark Gable of the Indian film industry, and his heroine Vajanti Mala. Both were predecessors to today's Bollywood blockbusters.

The last of three Indian film houses in the area, this venue was sadly closed down with the advent of video shops. The music from such shops now competes with recordings of religious prayer as you wander down Brick Lane.

The Leather Trade: Following in the steps of the Flemish wool weavers, Huguenots from Fournier, Wilkes and Hanbury Street, Irish, Jewish and Pakistani tailors, Bengali leather and textile wholesalers now sit alongside their Jewish and Pakistani cousins in the trade. The local industry is now shrinking in the face of cheap imports, but desirable addresses in many a Huguenot house once concealed small sweatshops behind their doors. Wholesale shops from the leather and clothing trade still dot the bottom of Brick Lane, while the odd-millionaire from the textile industry can still be found doing trade. *Mukim of Sylto? Reputedly first Bengali trader under 25 to become millionaire? Needs checking...*

Keep down Brick Lane

Sweet Shops: More recently, 'pan' – or betel nut – confectionary shops have set up alongside Bengali sweet shops as part successful chain stores operating in Bangladesh. Betel nut – which can cut hunger and acts as a stimulant – is traditionally eaten in villages on a leaf pasted with lime. *Try it for taste – but do be aware that it has been linked to throat cancer!*

Carry on to the corner of Fournier Street

Bangladesh Welfare Association: Nawab Ali describes signing the lease for 39 Fournier Street in 1961 for six thousand pounds to open the *Pakistan Welfare Association's* new offices. The same building housed a Huguenot charity in the 18th century and Jewish welfare centre in the 19th century.

Founded in 1952 to look after the welfare of an increasing number of Sylheti seamen arriving in London, this organization went on to organize major public meetings to address the rights of local Bengali Seamen. The foreign Minister of Pakistan was invited to one such meeting in 1954 to answer questions about discrimination experienced by 'East Pakistanis', as Bangladeshi people were known before 1971, who were often refused passports to work in Britain by the Pakistani High Commission. One of the results of this meeting was the creation by Aftab Ali in 1954, of the '*Overseas Seamen's Welfare Association*'.

Meanwhile, the PWA office, the first local Bengali voluntary advice agency, helped East Pakistani seamen with reading and writing letters, offering advice on opportunities for employment and assistance with matters relating to labour migration from East Pakistan. After East Pakistan's 1971 war of independence, this organization was re-named as *Bangladeshi Welfare Association*.

Mosque: For centuries the East End has been the first port of call for immigrant groups. The Brick Lane mosque is a unique example of this phenomena, having been built by Protestant French Huguenots in 1743, made into a Methodist church when Huguenot numbers dwindled, transformed into a synagogue in 1897 before being converted to a mosque in 1974.

Clifton's Restaurant / now Prithi: Owned by the infamous late Moussa Patel who once owned many an 'Indian' restaurant on Brick Lane, Clifton boasted of being one of the first Asian restaurants on Brick Lane. Have a look through the window of the restaurant's extension where painted murals of luxuriant women remain an attraction for local visitors.

Stop on the corner of Hanbury Street to indicate both the end of Brick Lane where sit ins were held (see section on Aftab Ali Park) as well as Mr Munshi's Hostel...

Mr. Munshi's Hostel: At a time when only five Sylheti seamen lived in East London, one famed resident of 16 Elder Street, now demolished, was Mr. Munshi. Arriving in London in 1922, Mr. Munshi later ran a lodging house in Code Street, off Brick Lane, for Bengali seamen. Ironically, this street is now the site of a hostel for homeless people.

Turn left on Hanbury Street - mention 48 in passing?

48 Hanbury Street :Along with other seamen such as the late Abdul Malik, Nawab Ali took a lease for 48 Hanbury Street to set up the equivalent of a 'Citizen's Advice Bureau' upstairs and a gambling club downstairs – until local MP Peter Shore said this wouldn't be appropriate. Drama classes were therefore scheduled downstairs instead.

Kobi Nazrul Centre: From writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare to Daniel Defoe the painter Mark Gertler and poet Isaac Rosenberg, to name a very few, Brick Lane has been home to artists throughout the centuries.

In 1982, the '*Kobi Nazrul Centre*', a cultural venue named after the great Bengali national poet, was opened at 30 Hanbury Street. Kobi Nazrul's status as a national figure stems from his talent as a poet and songwriter, as well as an activist for Indian independence who went to jail for his beliefs.

Musicians, poets, writers, painters and dramatists have followed in his steps. More recently, Gaffar Chowdhury, a local journalist, poet and writer, is also author of the lyrics of the Bengali National Anthem, while painters such as Shafique Uddin or local film-makers such as Ruhul Amin follow in a long tradition of artists who have lived and worked in the area.

Continue down Hanbury Street towards Commercial Street and turn left, stopping on corner of Fashion Street to point out location of Shah Jalal Restaurant

Shah Jalal Restaurant: Now demolished, this coffee shop on the corner of Fashion Street at 76 Commercial Street, was another magnet for Bengali people who left the ships for a life in London.

... Carry on down Whites Row towards Artillery Lane, passing Sandy's row...

Owned by Ayub Ali Masters who's original house and pre-war café, known as 'Number 13', lodged countless seamen finding their feet. Ayub Ali himself became the first President of the UK Muslim League, was founder of the 'Indian Seamen's Welfare League' in 1937 and a union representative who campaigned tirelessly for Bengali seamen's rights.¹⁶

Entered Artillery Passage

Artillery Passage: In the 1950's and 1960's, restaurant owners from around London stocked up on spices and ingredients for their catering businesses at Jarnail Singh's shop in Artillery Passage. Further down, Artillery Passage is also the home of *Dilchad*, one of the first Bengali restaurants to open up in the area. Following in the tradition of spices and international trade, Brick Lane now boasts of over one hundred Bengali restaurants.

Stop on the corner of Sandy's Row where the Gulshan restaurant now occupies the former site of Ayub Ali Master's home....

¹⁶ ibid pg 43

20th Century Migration:

After the Second World War, employment opportunities had increased. Seamen jumping ship in London were, however, breaching their contracts with shipping agents and could be forcibly returned to their ships. 'Deserters' had to remain hidden from the police and shipping companies' private detectives until their contracts expired or ships left port. Networks for Bengali seamen in London largely operated in two areas. A large percentage worked in catering in central London where the odd Bengali can probably still be found in the kitchens of hotels like the Savoy. Another community developed in East London, sheltered and supported by individuals like Mr. Munshi and the famed Ayub Ali Masters. Ayub Ali Master also set up *Crescent Travel* in Sylhet and *Orient Travel* at 13 Sandy's Row, to help thousands of post-war seamen process papers for migration to Britain. This address was the site of one of the first Bengali cafes in East London.

Many former seamen established themselves in this area, working in what was then a Jewish-run textile industry, cafes or through ingenious systems like moving from pub to pub to run mini-'lotteries' for drinkers wishing to gamble for chocolate bars. Most seamen talk about the difficulties of functioning in a large city where illiteracy meant mapping out routes to work by placing markers such as bricks on street corners – a precarious system of demarcation in a busy city – or of identifying buses through imagery such as 'two eggs' for bus No. 8 and 'two hooks' for bus No. 22 to the West End.

Cross Sandy's Row and down Middlesex Street

Off Middlesex Street: Bengal Warehouse, one of the first warehouses built by the East India Dock Company to store the goods from its namesake, lies today on the edge of a community which has followed in the footsteps its of trade over the last 400 years.

... past the Dilchad side of Artillery Passage, possibly pointing it out here rather than earlier, and onto Cutler Gardens...

Cutler Gardens and Commercial Road: These East India Company warehouses were the original storehouses for goods from the East. From Bengali jute and opium to ostrich feathers, ivory and silks, the value and volume of incoming cargo made it financially viable to build *Commercial Road* which leads from the East India docks to Cutler Gardens. Australian gold transported along this route to the City of London in 1769 was, for instance, accompanied by a heavy armed escort.

End at Liverpool Street station...

This ending allows for a 'loop' which literally brings up back to the origins of Bengali migration

Credits: Drafted by Daniele Lamarche for the Shadinata Trust to raise awareness of the continued presence and experiences of Bengalis in the area. Compiled through interviews with local seamen, pensioners, businessmen, community activities and historians, as well as the painstaking research of writers such as Rosina Visram, Bill Fishman, Caroline Adams and local artist and activist Dan Jones, we would like to extend a special thanks to all of them.

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Tours can also be organised. For more information, contact the Shadinata Trust Website at www.shadinata.org. or Daniele at Isalive@aol.com

Further Reading

Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain*, Pluto Press, 2002

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TIMELINE DETAILS:

BENGALIS IN EAST LONDON: *A Community in the Making for 500 Years*

In The Beginning...

It all began with spices. *At a time when pepper was dearer than gold, saffron more rare than diamonds...*¹⁷

Since Roman times, Europe had sea links with India and overland routes with China.

When ***Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453***, however, new trading interfaces had to be found. With appropriate finances raised and political details negotiated at the dawn of the

1600, London's Company of Merchants, which had already initiated trade in the East Indies, founded by charter from Queen Elizabeth I.

The ***first fleet of four ships set off from Woolwich in early 1601*** to Bantam

first British ship arriving in Surat, India, in 1608.

Over the next century, with some ***4600 ships for the East India Company making the voyage from London between 1602 and 1833***¹⁸.

An unprecedented growth of factories along the coast of India created a need for employees to administrate this monumental operation in India, as did labour for the dockyards, warehouses, foundries, saw mills and cordage works in Britain. It was a formula made to guarantee cheap labour and migration from India.

In 1614, a first dock was built in Blackwall near the present day Town Hall of Tower Hamlets Council.

1654, funded through deductions from local seamen's wages, ***St. Matthias Church*** was also built opposite present day Tower Hamlets College for pensioners and the inhabitants of Poplar. This church is all the more remarkable as the old masts of ships were used as arch supports for the structure and tombstones of the Company's managers are laid in its floors.

¹⁷ Sandy Tosvig, *Today Programme, February 2003*

¹⁸ *Trading Places*, Anthony Farrington, The British Library, 2002

Much immigration, exchange and trade between Britain and the East Indies can therefore trace its roots to the East India Company. In the absence of government controls, the Company effectively acted as a ruler of East Asia and India, setting the foundations for Crown through the initiation of trade of goods and people, the intervention in internal Indian affairs and ultimately, the establishment of the British Raj in India.

Establishment of Britain's direct rule over India in 1857 opening the sub-continent to wider commerce in the face of the East India Company's original monopoly, Indian sailors came in increasing numbers to work in the British merchant navy or as soldiers maintaining the British Raj in overseas colonies worldwide.

The British Sylheti Connection

The ***majority of Indians arriving in the early eighteenth century were either sailors employed by the East India Company, or ayahs - nannies or maid-servants - and 'man servants'*** returning with families from India. Many would have been Bengali, as Calcutta was one of the East India Company's original trade sites¹⁹.

A Sylheti connection was first established when the Revenue Collector for the province, Robert Lindsay, was sent ***in 1777*** by the Company to collect revenues from local *zamindar* landlords. When a local riot grew to become a revolt against home rule, Lindsay shot a *Pir Zada* – a Holy Man - from the local mosque of Shah Jalal, a Muslim 'saint' who brought Islam to the area from Yemen. Needless to say, he was very unpopular with local Muslims. One consequence, however, was that Syed Ullah, son of a *Pir Zada's* follower, actually travelled to Britain in search of Lindsay with a vicar's son returning from India. Syed found Lindsay on a street of his village, according to local lore, and was invited back to cook what might have been the first curry served to English diners by the first known Sylheti in Britain²⁰. Whether Syed had a change of heart and decided not to poison Lindsey, or simply failed in his ambition, we do not know for sure....

Why did Sylhetis from a province cut off from the coast, become seamen?

One seaman speculates that because Sylheti descendants of the venerated Shah Jalal and his 360 followers had fallen on hard times, it was more desirable to go abroad as labourers than to be seen doing manual work at home²¹. Others say that being descendants of these Arabs travellers, it is in the blood of Sylhetis to travel. Certainly, it helped to have Sylheti *serangs* in Calcutta, as these men were responsible for finding crew in vessels with men from their own birthplaces.

Conditions on ships were harsh, with cramped quarters, insufficient fresh food, fresh air or clothing for colder climates. Sylheti lascars were frequently stokers on steam liners,

¹⁹ *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*, Rozina Visram, Pluto Press, 1986

²⁰ *ibid*

^x *ibid* pg 12

with many dying from heat stroke, exhaustion or throwing themselves overboard in desperation²².

Back in London, in *1782, a memo from the East India Company complains of lascars finding their way to the head office in Leadenhall Street 'having been reduced to great distress and applying to us for relief'*.²³ By the *end of the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800's there were as many as 1,100 lascars in London at any one time*, and by the *early 1850's, some forty 'sons of India' were found dead of cold and hunger* on the streets of East London²⁴.

It was not until the *First World War, however, when 3,427 Indian crew members in British Merchant ships were killed*, that the P&O shipping line recognised the value of their contributions.

²² ibid pg 22

²³ ibid pg 17

²⁴ ibid