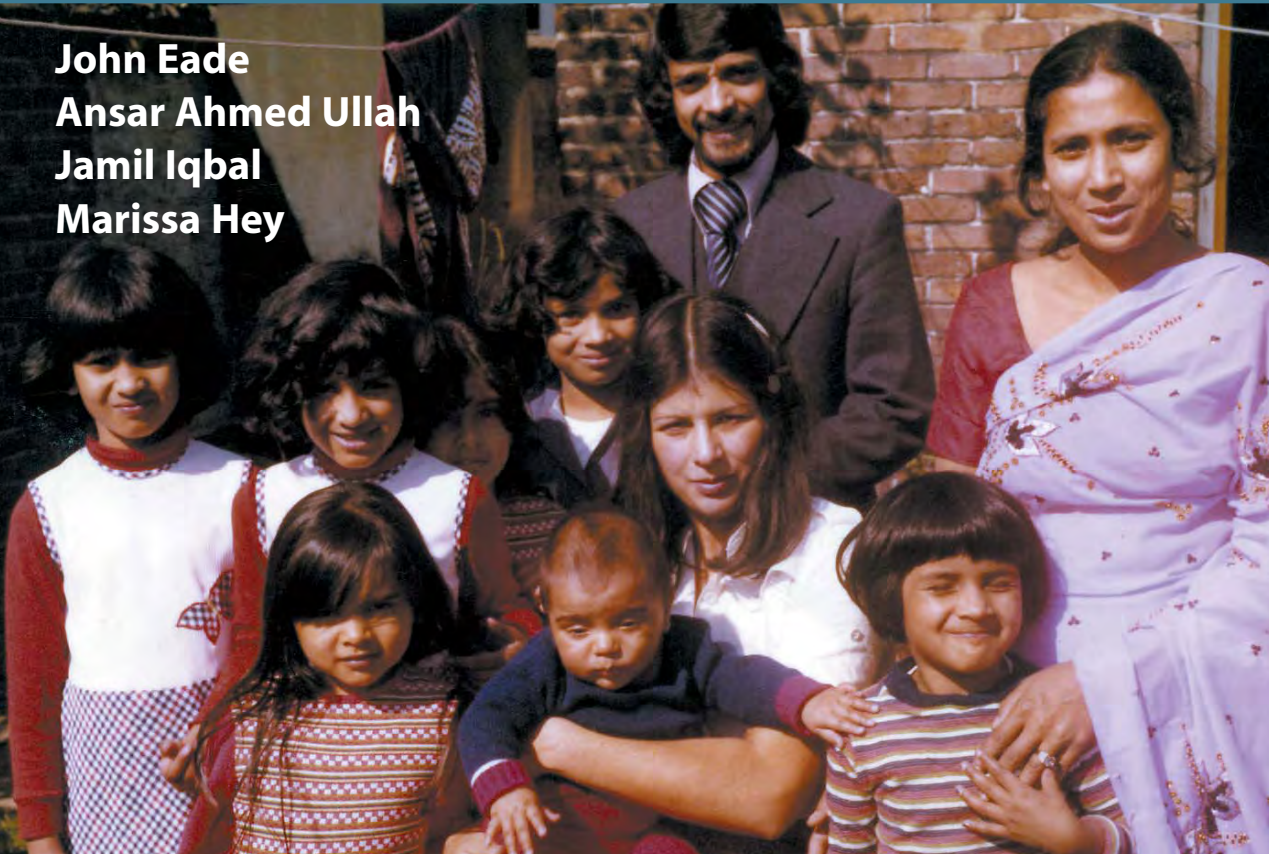


# Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain

Oral History and Socio-Cultural Heritage Project

**John Eade**  
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**Marissa Hey**



## Swadhinata Trust

The Swadhinata Trust is a project of the Nirmul Committee created to work with young people on a voluntary basis. It has been operating for a number of years, offering seminars, workshops, exhibitions and educational literature to young Bengali people in schools, colleges, youth clubs and community centres in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The need for the Swadhinata Trust has arisen from a sense that, an absence of documentation and social data representing Bengalis' heritage, historical presence and achievements. As part of its goal to promote Bengali culture for a wider national and international audience, the Swadhinata Trust's long-term goal is to establish a centre whose main activity will be in the field of culture, research and education.

[www.swadhinata.org.uk](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk)

## CRONEM

CRONEM (Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity & Multiculturalism), University of Surrey, is a multidisciplinary research centre in the field of nationalism, ethnicity and multiculturalism. It brings together those at University of Surrey and Roehampton University who are engaged in issues which lie at the nexus between nation, ethnicity, multiculturalism, citizenship and migration.

CRONEM focuses on crucial developments within contemporary society by drawing on the expertise of those working in internationally renowned academic units across the areas of Linguistics, Psychology, Social Anthropology and Sociology.

CRONEM's members have experience of research and knowledge about Bengalis in both Britain and Bangladesh and they are highly experienced in the collection and analysis of data, training and teaching.

See [www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM) for further details

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Compiled & Edited  
by

John Eade  
with  
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Bottom photo, Joi Bangla Crew on City Limits magazine cover 1987.

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# Preface

There are at least 300,000 Bengalis currently living in the UK and in Inner London they constitute the third largest ethnic group after the White British (see, for example [www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk) and London borough ethnicity profiles). Despite their substantial presence within the 'global city' of London and in urban centres across the country such as Luton, Birmingham and Oldham, oral histories of their settlement within this country has been limited to a few pioneering publications – for example, by Yousuf Choudhury and Caroline Adams. Many of the first settlers are now elderly (sadly some have already passed away) and their memories and experiences are being lost as their testimonies have not been recorded and preserved. This book aims to preserve some of the memories and experiences of the elders before this loss on a much grander scale than previously attempted.

Swadhinata has been able to undertake this larger project through funding provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The funding enabled us to employ a Project Manager (Verusca Calabria from September to December 2005 and then Jamil Iqbal from January to August 2006) and a Project Administrator. They worked closely with Prof John Eade, Executive Director of CRONEM at Surrey and Roehampton universities, who provided academic support and led the editing of the transcripts for this book with Marissa Hey, who undertook a placement with CRONEM from Zeppelin University, Germany. The project also enabled us to involve Bengali young people to research, document and celebrate Bengali heritage and history through recording the experiences of Bengalis across the UK.

The project looked at three generations' experience of being Bengali in multicultural Britain. The project consists of a collection of over fifty oral histories with a focus on three specific themes: '**roots and memory**' (dialogue between first and third generation on the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 war of independence); '**community creativity**' (dialogue between second and third generation on welfare and community involvement in the UK, from the 1970s-80s) and finally '**popular culture: between tradition and innovation**' (across three generations, mainly focussing on traditional and more recent British Bengali musical heritage, from the 1970s-80s).

We hope the dialogue between older and younger people will foster mutual learning by providing a unique space for an exchange of views and experiences. Young people will have the opportunity to understand the experience of their elders settling in Britain and adjusting to a new social environment through community involvement. Moreover, they will have the opportunity to link Bengali cultural traditions, expressed through music, with contemporary forms of cultural expression.

The young people involved with this project will have learned about their community's heritage, acquire skills in research and interviewing and, furthermore, will pass on this knowledge to other young people. The project itself is linked to various local heritage organisations and will also develop a learning pack in conjunction with Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service. It will, therefore, encourage non-Bengalis to look at the lives of people with diverse backgrounds, experience, and different values and customs.

The Bengali community in Tower Hamlets is the largest Bengali community in the UK as well as one of the largest outside Bangladesh and West Bengal. Naturally, Bengalis outside Tower Hamlets are interested to know more about Bengalis who live in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. We do hope our Project may inspire other UK Bengalis and non-Bengalis groups to carry out similar projects to document their own history and heritage.

This Project's key outputs are this book and educational brochures designed for use within secondary schools. In the book we draw on all the interviews but we have had to be selective, otherwise it would be even larger than it already is! A complete version of the transcripts will be made available on both the Swadhinata and CRONEM websites – [www.swadhinata.org.uk](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk) and [www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM).

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