



# PHOTOGRAPHS OF LONDON'S BENGALI EAST END

BANGLADESHI IDENTITY AND  
HERITAGE, 1971 AND BEYOND

# WHAT AM I DOING?

I will be looking through photo archives and choosing photos that resonate with me.

I wanted to do this project to be able to connect with my heritage: though I have not lived through the moments, experiences and events captured through these photos, I hope I can learn something from them.





## PRESENTATION COMPILED BY NAIMA AHMED

It was a great experience being able to put together something like this and I really hope I can take part in more of these projects! Thank you! 🍷💖🍷

Note: I've put some links in the 'Notes' section on a few of the slides. so please do have a look.

To begin with, I chose a photograph that is at once familiar and nostalgic. I am not sure where the nostalgia is coming from but it is perhaps the fact that the photo is in black and white!

I say this is familiar because it is a picture of the very street I have walked past for the 19 years I have been alive. Why not start from home, eh?

*Brune Street,  
where I live.*



Image: P06569 Toynbee Street c1982 300dpi 612

The street looks almost as if it could have been taken today, or even a couple of years ago. To think this was a picture taken almost 40 years ago, when my parents were all but children is somewhat jarring.

For some reason, with all the construction and work that has I've seen taking place as a teenager, I expected the change between 1982 and 2021 to be far more significant! That's not to say that it is not changing, however...

I'm sure everyone in the area, old and new can bear testimony to the rapid redevelopment of the area and the gentrification (see next slide!) that is being seen through.

It's just that this little snapshot of Toynbee street remains *seemingly* consistent. I could recognise this with my eyes closed...

In 2015/16, East End Homes planned for the our estate, with over 600 residents, to be demolished.



Credit: Holland Estate

After successful campaigning, the demolition was revoked.

Here is a link to a piece from the Spitalfields Life. It includes photos of families residing in Holland Estate, including my own.

<https://spitalfieldslife.com/2016/01/14/the-holland-estate-is-saved/>

Another photographic-journal-type piece takes us through Holland Estate in the 80s:

<https://spitalfieldslife.com/2015/04/10/at-the-holland-estate/>

These two links are also a pretty good summary of what impact these types of 'redevelopments' can have on residents:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/may/30/london-property-market-boom-housing-tower-hamlets>
- <https://eastlondonnews.co.uk/drones-eye-view-rationality-and-the-demolition-of-inner-city-housing-estates/>

I suppose the angle is slightly different to the picture before but I tried to replicate it as best as I could! Probably should have taken it in the morning then, oops! With the current lockdown restrictions though, it mainly looks the same with the exception of the builders working on the construction site on the left and causing all this noise. That is one of the things I hate about living here!



Image: A photo I took on a rainy Tuesday evening, 26/01/2021

I'd be interested to know what other people think about the change between the picture from the archives and the one I've taken here.

I guess part of the unique history of the East End is that it's always been changing and although the layout seems familiar and recognisable, the surrounding businesses (and demographics) have been shifting in recent years.

I've noticed an increase in East Asian, especially Chinese or Chinese-inspired restaurants, restaurants\*. This might have something to do with the increasing number of overseas students and workers and the development of new student housing blocks and offices in the area as well as the continual development of the Spitalfields area.

Even in the notorious Brick Lane, 'curry houses' have been taken over by vegan cafes and coffee shops amongst other things and are gradually decreasing in number.

This article from Beyond Banglatown, 'The decline of 'Banglatown'', has some great and comprehensible insights into the situation:

<https://beyondbanglatown.org.uk/globe/the-decline-of-banglatown/>

# Bangladesh 50

The photo of 'Bangladeshi children' is one of the first pictures (and also my favourite from the collection) that I started to think about as it came up in the initial discussion I had with Halima. I think it is interesting that the focus of the picture is the children playing on the street, even that 'Bangladeshi children' is the title of the photo. I say it is interesting because in my initial reaction they were actually the last thing I noticed! For me, the clothes hanging on the streets caught my eye immediately.

We spoke about how this type of presentation has often been interpreted as a sign of poverty, especially paired with street that is perhaps not sparkling and spotless. A white historian may well come to this sort of conclusion but though there might be some truth to this, **there is something very comforting about** clothes hanging on a washing line like that. It is the ultimate symbol of family-life and by extension, a big part of my upbringing.

I've never seen a street quite like the one depicted in this photo around here before but it is not hard to spot a potentially Bengali household when walking around Tower Hamlets. Sometimes, it is not the front that gives it away either, but the garden, like in my Nani's\* house where the clothes would get tangled up with the squeals and shrieks of my younger cousins.



Image: Phil Maxell. Child at Fieldgate Mansions, Stepney 1982.

A similar image has been used which we have permission to share. The original image in Tower Hamlets archive includes several children playing on the same estate with washing hanging behind them.

# Bangladesh 50



Image: Phil Maxell. Child at Fieldgate Mansions, Stepney 1982.

Having said this, it is not like I can claim clothes hanging out to dry on a washing line as something unique to Bangladeshi heritage, as despite the often monolithic and therefore rigid views of many historians and sociologists, the washing-line is a worldwide phenomena, sustainable and even artistic. Have a look at this travelogue:

<https://www.featureshoot.com/2016/06/seeing-the-world-through-clotheslines-from-italy-to-china-sponsored/>

The photo shown here is very similar to the newspaper image we looked at in the workshop. I love the angle of this photo and the way it captures the children at the forefront and the other man walking towards the camera, the consecutive washing lines – actually very neatly strung out – and the clothes almost fluttering like festival banners. I imagine they would have been quite colourful too, with all sorts of weird and wonderful prints.

Something that I almost missed, if Halima hadn't picked it out was the fact that there are different generations represented in this snapshot alone. From the man, to the children and even the different sized clothing, there is evidence of settlement, of building lives and families and routines. There was therefore an undeniable Bengali presence and community.



I have to admit that I sometimes struggle to hold a conversation with my grandparents because my Sylheti is not so good. It makes me think about all the history I am missing out on as I've never known how to bring up conversation about sensitive topics like discrimination. I do want to know how it personally impacted them, however. So this is something I will challenge myself to do!



Image: Phil Maxwell. Women at an anti-racist demo, East London 1983

'March against racial violence'. In all honesty, I did not know just how much sickening violence the older generations suffered through, until I read some articles and interviews\* from people at the time. The attacks were brutal, savage and inhumane, and against some of the most vulnerable people.

I think there is a particular stigma about how complacent the Bangladeshi community in the East End is. We are poor, uneducated and have poor future prospects.

But demonstrations like these show us (quite literally) a different picture. It's proof of survival and confrontation against injustice.

The outcry caused by the death of Altab Ali was a reaction of all the things that had been building up and I'm sure most Bangladeshis living in the East End have heard his name before.

# Bangladesh 50

The image of people marching through Brick Lane is visually appealing and captures the spirit of the East End. It's amazing to see this act of solidarity and is testament to the varied experiences of our communities.

From racially motivated attacks, lack of protection from the police, neglect from the government regarding housing and the torment from the National Front to long, difficult work hours and conditions, the Bangladeshi community had a lot they could protest against and for.

My Dada\* did tell me he took part in some of these demonstrations. I remember him mentioning they walked to Hyde Park and the people even from outside of London and non-Bengalis had joined them.

# Bangladesh 50



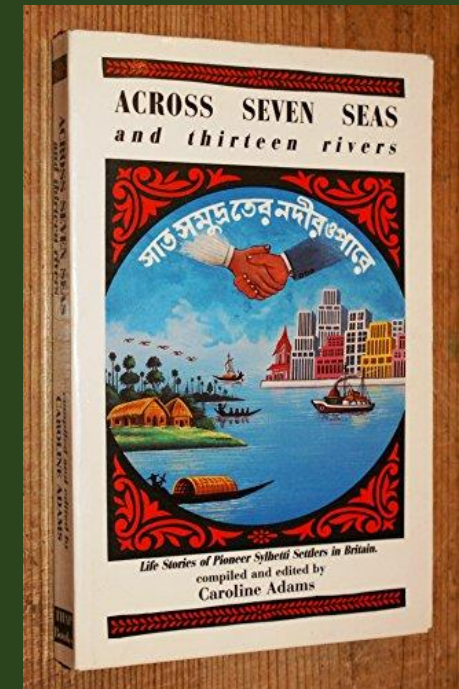
I never really heard about Seamen (also referred to as Lascars) before which is surprising considering this is some of the most important history – after all, they were some of the first people from Sylhet to arrive in the UK, with many then settling in Cable St, Shadwell, East End Docks and surrounding areas.

I feel as though, within my generation, we know about things like Altab Ali and the fight for the mother tongue. We have heard about Partition and we know where the are established Bangladeshi communities throughout the UK. But what we might not know as much about, is how we got here in the first place...

Image: Limehouse Trio. Three seamen outside Dumbar House on the West India Dock Road, Limehouse, London, circa 1925. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

This got me thinking about movement and migration which are relatively new concepts to me in that I'd never actually stopped to think about what it really means – what does it look like for different communities? It is such a shame that we are not taught about the arrival of different ethnic groups into the UK when this can teach us so much about the present, as well as the conditions in the past.

I started looking at this pdf to get some more information (<https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Bengalis-in-Londons-East-End-Book.pdf>) and I also hope to get my hands on 'Across Seven Seas' as I'm excited to read about the lives of these Seamen.



# Bangladesh 50

I chose to include these pictures as they got me thinking about the importance and history behind the tailoring industry being some of the first jobs taken on by those settling in the UK.

*Working lives: from clothing to catering:*

<https://beyondbanglatown.org.uk/globe/working-lives-clothing-to-catering/>

Image: P21554 Lansbury Market 300.jpg



The importance and culture surrounding market places also intrigues me as they have always been social places. Whitechapel Market and Watney Market are the few places my own grandmother feels she is able to go herself and likes to go for a walk there even if she doesn't plan on buying anything.

I know many younger Bengalis who have mixed feelings about Whitechapel Market but we cannot deny the significance it has for the elder generations as something so much more than a place to buy things. Even I enjoy the occasional stroll through the market with a friend, stopping to buy some must-have snacks along the way: shingara, samosa chaat and jalebi!

This family portrait of The Miah Family 1978 is reminiscent of the ones that used to hang on walls of the staircase in my maternal grandparents' house.

The family here however, look like they haven't been forced at gunpoint to take the photo! By this, I mean that my own grandparents have a very distinct look when it comes to taking photos: straight-faced and straight-backed! 😊

It seems there could be multiple generations in this photo which gives us insight into the way people lived, with three generations perhaps living together in one household. Housing issues such as squatting and overcrowding has always been a problem in Tower Hamlets, and overcrowding is arguably still one of the biggest issues our communities face (especially highlighted now during the pandemic) but the family look happy and the photo itself is incredibly sweet... I wonder who was behind the camera!

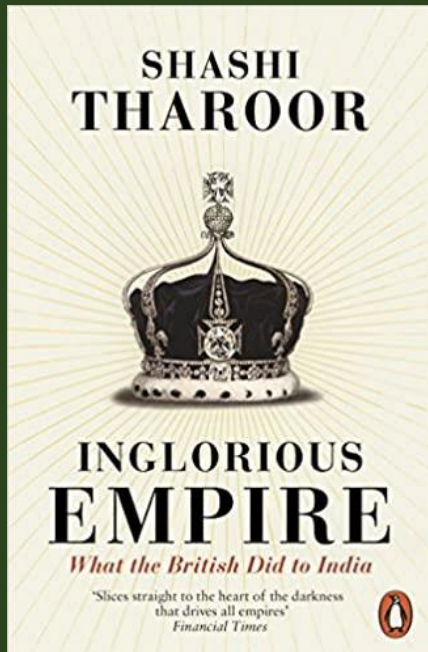
It inspires me to find out more about my own families' histories and I'd love to get my hands on some photos too.

Rewind back some seven years ago and we are sitting in my Year 8 history lesson, arguably one of my favourite lessons of that year and with my favourite teacher Ms. Higgs, a very big fan of the British monarchy.

The lessons were focusing mainly on the British Empire and the Transatlantic slave trade. There is one particular 'debate' we had about whether or not the British Empire was successful – was it a good or a bad thing? At the time the absurdity (and the privilege that comes with even being able to debate this) of the question did not occur to me. It would be about two or so years later when I really started to get angry with the school curriculum. Back then, it was simply an interesting discussion in an interesting lesson, and I suppose I might even have thought that it was something that did not concern me, that it was all over now anyway...

Of course, this is exactly the way the curriculum is designed. We glossed over the abhorrent treatment of the enslaved people only to focus on the reasons why the British thought it a good idea to start their expeditions across the world. Brave men sacrificing families and familiarity for a cause they thoroughly believed in. 'Was it good or bad?' *Well, who are we asking?* The fact that the group of 12-13 year old Bangladeshi girls in that classroom did not even consider that there could be a viewpoint other than the one of the White British man – well, that says a lot. We are always looking at history through the *same* lens. And yet, humans exist in multiplicity. So where are the silenced voices?

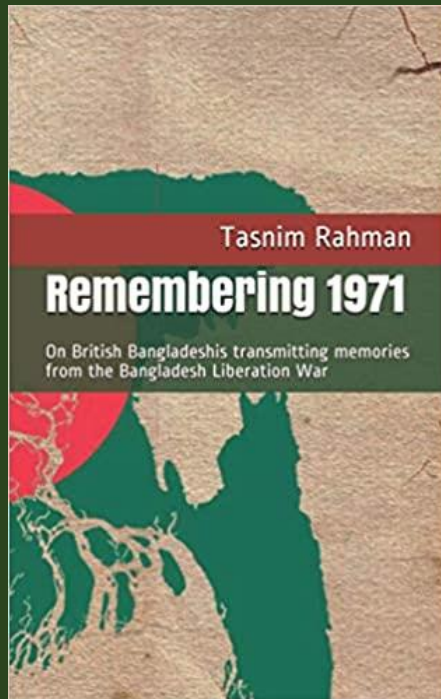
The erasure of Bangladeshi voices within Partition literature, both fictional and factual, has long troubled me. Whilst there are accounts from India and Pakistan, it is so hard to come by Bangladeshi fiction, (auto)biography and history. Not only is there much less text but what there is, is so inaccessible and hard to come by.



# Bangladesh 50

## REFLECTIONS:

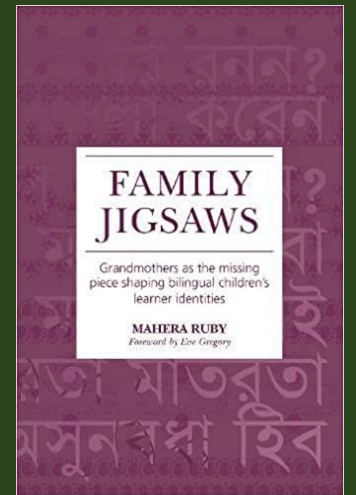
Often, in accounts of partition or on the topic of South Asia, Bangladesh is given a mere paragraph, even if it is a long one! Part of this might be due to the fact that Bangladesh is a newly formed country. Yet, the people have been there for centuries but still, this is never clear from the way we are included in history and are written about\*. Why?



Relating this back to more recent and living history and the Bengali diaspora, particularly in the East End of London, the Sylheti community have seemingly more of an oral tradition than a literary one. Many of the older generation were never formally educated so their literacy skills even in Bangla are limited or absent. Arguably, many of the people here were focused more on making a living and fighting for their own space than writing about their lives and experiences. Drawing on from my own grandmas' experiences, many of the women felt lonely and isolated, being unable to rely on anyone for support, being unable to speak English.

I am not well versed with Bengali literary legacy if I'm honest with you. Apart from Tagore and Begum Rokeya, I am ashamed to say I really don't know much. Whether this is due to my own ignorance or whether there has been a deliberate erasure and censorship of Bengali literature (or both!), I would like to take the opportunity going forward to try and find out

I think other ways of storytelling and documenting are integral to sustaining culture and heritage. This is why projects like these which collect oral histories, interviews, personal artefacts and photographs are so incredibly important. Photographs, though they may be one dimensional are easily accessible to most people and in the digital age can be stored safely.



# Bangladesh 50

(RELEVANT) LITERATURE, STUDIES, ARTICLES AND BLOGS  
THAT I HAVE COME ACROSS WHILST COMPILING THIS PRESENTATION:

<https://spitalfieldslife.com/2019/11/07/raju-vaidyanathans-brick-lane/>

*Raju Vaidyanathan's Brick Lane*

This piece in the Spitalfields Life shows us the work of Photographer Raju Vaidyanathan and the inspiration behind these photo archives.



<https://beyondbanglatown.org.uk/>

This is such a fun and informative website to look through. I loved the layout and had a great time exploring all the features and articles.



UCL History student Adila Mir explores the history of the British-Bangladeshi Community in London's East End. December marks Bangladesh's victory in their war of independence.

*Roots in Resilience: A Brief History of the British-Bangladeshi Community in London's East End.*  
[08/12/2020]\*

I found this account and thought it was of interest as it is written by a fellow young British Bangladeshi who explores similar themes, and includes similar photos to the ones I've included here.



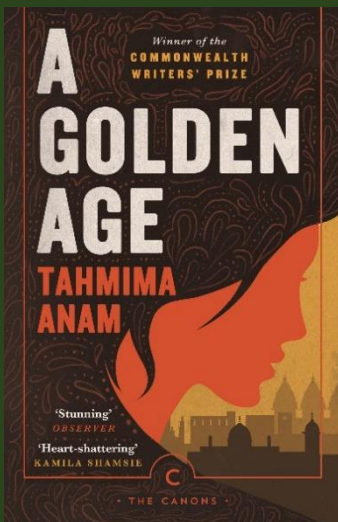
# Bangladesh 50

Top tip! To find more resources, always have a look at footnotes and references of texts you already have access to. It will give you so much more to go through. Although, a downside is that a lot of the time you may end up not being able to find most things, and if you do there might be issues with being able to affordably access them, especially if they're academic papers or books.

<https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Bengalis-in-Londons-East-End-Book.pdf>

*Bengalis in London's East End* [Ansar Ahmed Ullah & John Eversley]

This book taught me quite a few new things! It is not as intimidating as some academic textbooks are and includes some great pictures. This makes it quite summarised but it's great for gaining a broad idea of many different things. It touches on quite a few topics that were not so clear to me at the beginning of the project and is a great starting point. A big thanks to Swadhinata Trust for having it so readily available.



<https://sarahglynn.net/>  
<https://sarahglynn.net/writing/>

It seems like Sarah Glynn has written quite a bit on British Bangladeshis although I've not been able to read anything just yet!



<http://www.banglastories.org/index.html>

**BANGLA STORIES**

