



Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 320 pages. 15 halftones, 2 maps, 4 tables. Hardcover, \$35.00/£25.95/€31.50. ISBN: 978-0-674-06666-3.

IN *Bengali Harlem*, Vivek Bald tells the story of Bengali-Muslim immigration and settlement in the United States. The story begins in the late 1800s, not in 1965, as one might expect. Most scholars have suggested that the 1965 Immigration Act was a watershed moment for Asian immigrants (see LAWRENCE 2002). Though it is true that after the 1965 Immigration Act, South Asians were granted more opportunities to obtain visas and immigrate to the United States, it does not explain the presence of working-class Bengali Muslims. The story of the Bengali-Muslim presence in America began much earlier and was sparked by events happening thousands of miles away under British colonial rule in India.

The men whose history Bald uncovers are mostly, but not exclusively, Bengali Muslims. These Muslim men arrive during segregation, and many of them settle down permanently. It is a story that defies the myth of the model minority South Asian immigrant. To piece together this history, Bald utilizes an impressive array of sources. The result is an incredible narrative that traces the movement of peddler merchants from the Hooghly region of greater Bengal to ports in the American northeast, then south to New Orleans. Chikondars (traders of *cikan* textiles) of the Hooghly region just north of Calcutta were being pushed out of the market in India by the British East India Company's less expensive machine-made fabrics. These merchants made trips beyond the subcontinent to find new demand for their products. They discovered a growing market for their goods abroad. America's fascination with the east coupled with Americans' growing desire to own and possess material goods from the Indian subcontinent created a new market. The merchant peddlers successfully entered through Ellis Island and began to move through the US to resort towns in New Jersey and then further south to New Orleans. Bald describes the ways in which these peddlers set up a complex network from the Hooghly to the US where they worked in concert to sell their wares. The intricate web was successful because the Bengali immigrants were well connected, due to settling in local communities within their newly chosen homeland. They married African-American and Puerto Rican women who played a vital role in their lives.

We also learn that their American lives were not all easy. Americans, during this period, may have wanted the goods from South Asia but they were far from welcoming of these men. Many were, in fact, deported upon arrival at Ellis Island. Bald explains their ambiguous place in American society during segregation by asking a series of pertinent questions. How did Americans view these men, for example? Also, how did they fit into a binary America that was divided by race? Bald attempts to answer such questions, and he demonstrates that the answers are not

simple. We thus learn that the subjects of his book navigated the racialized spaces of America with multiple strategies.

Difficulties notwithstanding, the men continued to arrive in the United States as British merchant marines. Though navigating life in America was burdensome for them, many remained so they could help pay land taxes in their home villages. Even getting to the shores of North America was difficult. Bald describes harsh conditions on the ships and the racial division of labor. He explains the inequities they endured and how they overcame them. Some sought work on other national vessels or sold goods at different ports. Some even got off the ships, never looking back as they moved further into the American industrial belt during wartime. They secured jobs in factories and continued to marry African-American and Puerto Rican women.

Bald discusses in detail the extraordinary alliances between Bengali Muslims and African-American and Puerto Rican women. He adeptly explains how Bengali Muslims comfortably rooted themselves in African-American and Puerto Rican communities, such as Harlem, while also maintaining Bengali-Muslim ties and traditions. They gathered at the Indian Merchant Marine Club, for example, and later, after Partition, also at the Pakistani League of America, both of which provided spaces to be at home in the United States. At the same time, Bald traces a fascinating story concerning cultural exchange and racism in British India and America as South Asians increasingly intermingled with African-American communities. The reader can easily imagine a time when there were closer ties between South Asians and African-Americans—a sense of similar if not common struggle.

The book also glosses the ways in which Islam was a part of these men's lives. Here Bald does not delve deep enough. The reader is left not knowing if the men experienced regret or a sense of loss. Bald then moves to the post-1965 Immigration Act period, rightly pointing out that the ties to African-Americans and Puerto Ricans gradually begin to become less prominent as South Asians legally start arriving in large numbers to establish their own communities.

The book's biggest contribution is its attention to the working-class migrants from Bengal. Bald also successfully illuminates the contours of the complex racial environment, showing how laws and prejudices contributed to the bonding and connections between African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Bengali Muslims. Though the book is about South Asian (primarily Bengali Muslims) working-class men's arrival before the 1965 Immigration Act, it seems a big segment of the story is missing. Bald spends little time discussing the impact of the men's departure from South Asia or their birthplace. Do the men ever return? We do not get a sense of what was left behind and how leaving impacted the lives of those who remained in the homeland. It is clear that this group of men influenced the United States, albeit in small ways. But if that truly were the case, would not their natal homes be altered by their absence? Many of the immigrant Bengalis discussed by Bald continued to support family ties. We know from Katy GARDNER's 2002 work that many men sent money home, without which there would never have been as much development in contemporary Bangladesh as has been witnessed in some areas such as Sylhet, which is the wealthiest division of Bangladesh. The economic

miracle of this region could only have happened because of the out-migration of men seeking out greener pastures. The wealth Gardner discusses began pouring in from these first men who jumped ship in American ports. Bald leaves out this important aspect of the global story. Nevertheless, the contribution of his book is enormous.

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