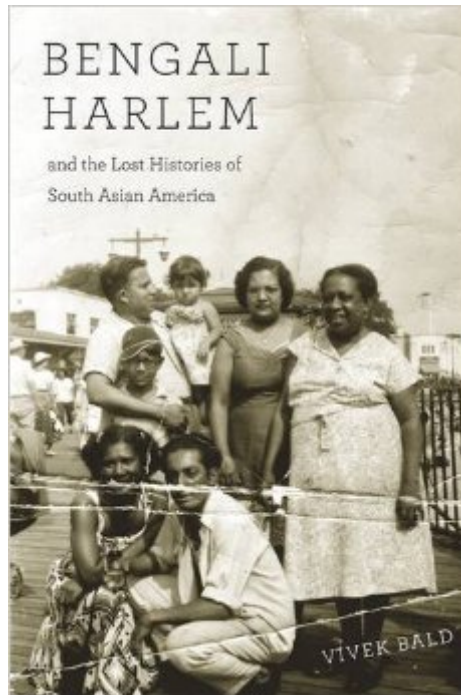


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# Bengali Harlem And The Lost Histories Of South Asian America



## Synopsis

Nineteenth-century Muslim peddlers arrived at Ellis Island, bags heavy with silks from their villages in Bengal. Demand for "Oriental goods" took these migrants on a curious path, from New Jersey's boardwalks to the segregated South. Baldwin's history reveals cross-racial affinities below the surface of early twentieth-century America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a splendid, beautifully written book about a little known early immigrant community. I had heard about Bengali immigrants in Harlem (and ate at their restaurants when I was a student at Columbia University) but had no idea they had such a presence in the south. It was hard to put the book down once I began reading it.

It was the result of painstaking research that took many years to complete. It covers an area that was hardly explored before this ever so thoroughly. It talks and reveals of two streams of people (exclusively Bangla-speaking Muslims from South Asia) who came to America. They come from families who were, in many cases, victims of loan sharks and landlords of Bengal who were milking them with direct support of the English Shahibs. The same Shahibs and their local zamindars were instrumental in stopping them from producing prized Muslin (in favor of Manchester clothes) and food (in favor of dyes, indigo, and drug). The first group are those Bengali Muslims from Hoogly area (just north of Calcutta port) who came during 1885-2005 as peddlers of "embroidered chikans"

and other interesting goodies. Many of these peddlers would go back and forth bringing in their goodies. They would be followed next (until about 1925 or so) by braver people from far away Sylhet and Noakhali - the ship-jumpers, who would be working on the ships, changing jobs, changing ships, and changing oceans until they would be bound for America. This latter group would often rely on the first group and many others from other nations who had already joined American industrial underclass. During the past 35 years, I had the fortune of meeting fellow-travellers, children and grandchildren of these ship jumpers. I am so pleased to read this wonderful book.

I have known about Vivek and Alaudin's efforts to put out a book and documentary on the early Bangladeshi community for almost 8 years now. When I found out that this book was finally being published, I was super excited and overwhelmed with emotion. One of my family members was the first Bangladeshi man in NYC, his story has been lore in my family and I was fortunate to meet him one last time before he passed. This is a great history book outlining the experience and journeys of a community that had been lost to history. Any person interested in history, immigration, US history and South Asian communities etc. will be hooked by this book. For me however, the connection to this book goes beyond that. It is the story of my family, a history I have never seen written down. It was an amazing and surreal experience to read about my loved ones as I turned the pages. I have lost all of them, my last surviving grand uncle in NYC passed away a few years ago, but this book keeps them alive. So I highly recommend this book, I promise that you will learn things you never knew, but also realize that these histories mean so much to people who now have a deeper connection to their roots and heritage here in the United States.

Coincidentally, I'd just finished reading the *Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson when I heard an NPR interview with the author of this book. I was immediately hooked because of the similarities and parallels between the African American community's trek out of the south and the Bengali seamen's trek across our country. The fact that the Bengalis, because of their dark skin, faced some of the same prejudices and outrages that American born Blacks faced, was eye opening and saddening. Good book with extensive documentation. Must-read if you are interested in another facet of our American history.

This takes a great historical account of what many people were unaware of. I did not know that there were other groups of people who faced discrimination. They only teach you about select

groups of people in school. I haven't finished reading yet but what I have read so far is amazing.

This is a story of my husband's grandfather, Sofur, who he never met. His grandfather died 12 years before he was born. The verbal stories, he heard about him, are outlined in this book. This book has validated his ancestral history.

It's very sporadic. The narrative is muddled and doesn't chose a clear voice. It reads like a history book documenting the experience of south Asians that first came to America. It is a necessary piece of literature that encapsulates a vast amount of knowledge.

Great insight on a history that I didn't know existed. Well written, looking forward to Bald's documentary. I would recommend to any reader, whether it be for a class or for leisure.

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