NO immigrant community has so completely made its mark on one London borough in the way that the Bangladeshis have on Tower Hamlets.

More than one in three Tower Hamlets residents now consider themselves ethnic Bangladeshis, and in the wards of Spitalfields and Bangla Town they make up almost 60% of the local population -- even greater than the proportion of Indians in Southall Broadway.

It is a rapidly growing community. In 1991, there were about 37,000 Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, and very few anywhere else in London. But by 2001, the population had exceeded 67,000 in Tower Hamlets and there were large new concentrations in West Ham and King's Cross. Currently, the population stands at around 100,000.

The Bangladeshis who started arriving in Britain since the 1950s were poorer and often less educated than the Indians who preceded them. The new breed quickly developed one good idea into a national institution: the curry house. The rapidity and thoroughness with which such exotic novelties as mango chutney and rogan josh were absorbed into the British mainstream is perhaps without parallel in any other country. And in the process Brick Lane, near the busy West End, became a food destination for thousands of Londoners.

In the last half-century, curry has become more traditionally English than an English breakfast. The "chicken tikka masala" is now a national dish of Britain, and Bangladeshi food is a £4 billion industry in Britain. The vast majority of Indian restaurants in Britain are owned and run by Bangladeshis. Initially, Bangladeshis termed their restaurants as Indian curry houses, but soon they established their own identity behind an industry worth billions of pounds and employing thousands.

The hybrid Bangladeshi-Indian curry house is now a household name in Britain. More than 8 out of 10 Indian restaurants in the UK are owned by Bangladeshis, the vast majority of whom -- 95% -- come from Sylhet. In 1946, there were 20 restaurants or small cafes owned by Bangladeshis, in 1960 there were 300, and by 1980, more than 3,000. Now, according to the Curry Club of Great Britain, there are 8,500 Indian restaurants, of which roughly 7,200 are Bangladeshi. However, Bangladeshis in UK claim that there are 11,000 restaurants which are entirely owned by Bangladeshi-Britishers.

UK needs skilled chefs

The 11,000 Bangladeshi-owned restaurants in the UK are badly in need of over 10,000 workers, especially skilled chefs. The need is not only for the restaurants of Bangladeshi-dominated Tower Hamlets, but also for the restaurants in Oldham of Manchester. India, with an abundance of skilled chefs, is filling up the vacant posts because of the failure of Bangladeshis to do so.

Most of the 5 lakh Bangladeshis living in the UK are somehow linked with the restaurant business, and earn about 4.5 billion pounds annually. This is possible because the restaurants made Bangladeshi cuisine very popular across Great Britain, which, to some extent, is changing the food habits of the British people.

The celebration of the birthday of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's daughter at a Bangladeshi restaurant also proves the popularity of Bangladeshi cuisine. Moktar Ali, who migrated to UK in the 60s and is now Motwalli of a mosque at Oldham, says that customers usually go to the restaurants where there are good chefs. "Demand for quality chefs in the UK is so high that many of them often switch from one restaurant to another for higher pay," he said.

Restaurant traders said that Bangladeshis, despite being unskilled, could learn the skills in one or two years, but work permits are needed for entry into the country. It is also important to train skilled chefs in Bangladesh, they thought. The Bangladesh High Commission is negotiating with the British government in this regard.

But the Bangladeshis who, with a population of half a million, are one of the largest ethnic minority migrant communities in Britain, are relatively slower in integrating themselves with mainstream British society and establishing themselves in business, administration, and other well-paid jobs, compared to other ethnic minorities.

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According to recent research in London, young people from different ethnic minorities are transcending Britain's class system and beating their working-class white peers to well-paid jobs. The new generations of Indian, Chinese, Caribbean and African people are sailing ahead in the employment market, but people from Pakistan and Bangladesh were underperforming compared to other migrant groups.

The University of Essex study, which tracked the employment of 140,000 people in England and Wales over 30 years from the 1960s, said that people from Indian working-class families are the most successful. It said that 56% from those families took up professional or managerial roles, while only 43% from white, non-immigrant families went into such jobs. But not all ethnic minorities were experiencing success in the employment market.

It said that the fact that a disproportionate number of "upwardly mobile" youngsters were the children of immigrants was to be applauded, but their welcome progress is no cause for complacency, especially when it appears to be so much harder for young people from Pakistani or Bangladeshi families to get ahead.