

The Lascars boarded British ships from the Hooghly port. [1890 Courtesy-Archives of the British Library]

Down the Surma
Origins of the Diaspora

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It all began with a blood feud. The year was 1778 and the East India Company had just appointed Robert Lindsay "Resident Collector" of Sylhet. Lindsay, an enterprising Scot, was determined to fill the Company's coffers. But at the same time he meant to look out for himself. Shortly after arriving in Sylhet, he started trading in elephants and limestone, and within a few years made a personal fortune. His dual role as trader and governor, however, stirred discontent. The Muslims of India were still smarting from their recent losses at British hands, and the Sylhetis in particular yearned for freedom. The leading families of Sylhet were stalwart Muslims, descendants of a long line of warriors and reformers beginning with Shah Jalal, the 'Saint of Kunya' and his companions. Lindsay himself regarded the tomb of Shah Jalal as a potential hotbed of resistance

Disaster struck the region in 1781 when a devastating flood wiped out the crop. The resulting famine killed almost a third of the population [W.W Hunter, 1868]. Although Lindsay wrote to Fort William, Calcutta urging tax exemption, the locals blamed the British for failing to prevent the catastrophe. There was an uprising, led by Syed Hadi and Syed Mahdi, sons of a prominent local family. In his Anecdotes of An Indian Life, Lindsay simply refers to the leader of the rebellion as "Pirzada" -- literally, "son of a religious leader".

Lindsay and his army faced the Pirzada's followers near the site of the famed Shahi Eidgah in Sylhet. The rebels, armed with swords and spears, were no match for the firepower of the British. Although they fought gallantly, the uprising was swiftly quelled and the Pirzada was killed in battle. In Anecdotes, Lindsay recalls how he lived in fear of revenge attacks by the Pirzada's followers for as long as he remained in Sylhet.

By 1809, Robert Lindsay was back home in Britain lead-