ing a life of retired luxury. One day, while out riding, he spotted an Indian by the side of the road. On questioning, the man said he had arrived on a merchant vessel from Bengal. It turned out he was from Sylhet, and so Lindsay invited him to his mansion. The man, Syed Ullah, said he was looking for a Briton named "Lindsay". "When I told him who I was, he looked at me with hatred in his eyes. 'So it was you who killed Pirzada!' "

Syed Ullah had come to avenge Pirzada's death. Lindsay expressed regret and explained that he was doing his duty on that day. It is not clear how, but the wily Scot managed to gradually defuse the tension. After the two had made peace, Lindsay asked Syed Ullah if he could cook curry. The Sylheti man replied that curry was his specialty and he usually carried some spices with him. Lindsay requested Syed Ullah to whip up an "Indian" meal. Lindsay writes in his memoirs that his family members begged him not to eat anything cooked by the oriental man. His children's governess had apparently dreamt that a black man had poisoned the entire family. Lindsay, however, was unmoved. "Never was a curry better dressed," he wrote in Anecdotes, "and never did I have a better meal."

This strange incident may have been embellished slightly by Robert Lindsay, but it is actually the first specific report of a Sylheti in Britain. It is all the more remarkable because it brings together several of the threads that run through the early part of the British Bangladeshi narrative colonialism, the sea, and curry.

Sylhet's maritime past has been all but erased. Ask a local man about the seafaring "Sarangs" of old and you are likely to get a blank look. But it was not too long ago that names like Ayub Ali Master, Surab Sarang and Chowdhry Sarang were household names in the Sylhet region. The name "Sarang Bari" (Mariner's Home) harks back to a forgotten era in Sylhet's history. Very rarely one meets an old-timer whose eyes will light up at the mention of those names. "Ahhh, those Jahaji (sailor) folk! They were brave men!"

At the turn of the twentieth century, thousands of young Sylheti men were serving on board British merchant ships. Sylheti voices were very common on the decks of the ocean-going vessels of P&O, Clan and Turner shipping lines. These intrepid seamen were known as Lascars. Lascar means "group of men" or army and the term reflects the nature of the contract with the shipping company. The lascars were not hired as individual sailors but as a crew, and their leader and spokesman was the sarang.

The number of Lascars on British ships swelled with the World Wars, as demand for able-bodied sailors grew. Many of the sailors had one-way contracts, and temporarily ended up on the docks of London and Liverpool until they could secure passage back home. Gradually seamen's hostels sprang up in the docklands, and a small but tenacious community was established. Some of the men married English women. Old records from the city of London archives refer to women known as "Lascar Sally" and "Calcutta Louisa".

Hundreds of Bengali sailors perished during the wars. German U-boats dogged the merchant convoys and a large percentage was sunk. It is unclear how many Sylheti sailors died since the shipping companies normally lumped them as "native lascars", but oral history paints a bleak picture of how the Sylheti men lived in constant fear of torpedoes. More than one third of the Sarangs who went to sea met a watery grave. Young Sylhetis who wanted to escape the treacherous conditions began to jump ship in London. They joined a small band of desperate men who made a living working in the factories that were running overtime to support the war effort. Gradually, the Sylheti community grew.

The Sylhetis remained independent landowners, but often the holding was not large enough and the land not fertile enough to support a growing population. They did not fancy doing menial chores for a pittance in the tea gardens, and so were forced to look outward.

The question of why able-bodied Sylheti men went to sea is one that has not been adequately answered. It is a remarkable fact considering that Sylhet is a hilly area far from the coast. Many historians and sociologists while trying to solve this riddle have jumped to incorrect conclusions. Some have suggested that Sylheti men came into contact with British planters while working in the tea estates, and were recruited by shipping companies desperate for sailors. But this is a false notion. Sylhetis refused to work in the plantations. Tea planters regularly lamented the absence of local labour and the British were ultimately forced to bring in labourers by the trainloads from famine-stricken areas of Bihar and Orissa. To this day, tea workers have a different complexion and speak in a different tongue compared to local Sylhetis.

A study of the socio-political history of the region indicates that Sylhetis took to the ships for the very reason they refused to labour in the tea estates. The Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis [1793], a system of land reform which essentially carved up the land between large zamindars in Bengal, was never in force in Sylhet. The Sylhetis remained independent landowners, but often the holding was not large enough and the land not fertile enough to support a growing population. They did not fancy doing menial chores for a pittance in the tea gardens, and so were forced to look outward.

Trade was the lifeblood of the British Empire, and there was a chronic shortage of seamen. Without cheap labour from the colonies the wheels of industry would grind to a halt. The conditions were harsh and the pay was low compared to European sailors, but Sylhetis still boarded British merchant ships in large numbers from Calcutta's Hoogly port.

The Sylheti sailors were used to cooking their own food on board ship, because they needed their food to be halal. This practice continued in London. The smell of curry wafted across the docklands. At that time there were many