Englishmen in London who had returned after a stint in India, and they had acquired a taste for curry. One fine day a resourceful Sylheti had the bright idea of selling curry as street food. Ayub Ali Master, an ex-seaman, opened a Curry cafe in Commercial Road, London in the 1920s. Others soon followed, and the Sylheti community hasn't looked back since.

Fast forward to the present. There are an estimated half a million Britons of Bangladeshi origin. The Bangladeshi restaurant business is a £4 billion industry and young people today are increasingly looking to professions such as medicine, finance, law and IT to climb the socio-economic ladder.

Despite the success, complex challenges remain. A study in 2003 found that around 18 per cent of economically active Bangladeshi men were unemployed. This contrasts with whites (5 per cent) and Indians (7 per cent). Disadvantages in the labour market and a sense of exclusion force British Bangladeshis to look inward and to "stick to their own".

Against this backdrop of increased sensitivity, Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane was always going to stir strong emotions. Although critically acclaimed, many British Bangladeshis felt it had portrayed the community in a negative way and made no mention of its struggle to integrate. "We are afraid it will reinforce negative stereotypes," said Brick Lane resident Abdul Latif.

Monica Ali who has never lived in Brick Lane and does not speak Bangla, insists her novel doesn't represent all British Bangladeshis. But when the Times calls the book "a piercing look at British Islam" it becomes clear that like it or not, Ali is carrying the burden of representation.

Stereotypes came back to haunt British Muslims after the terrorist attacks of 7th July 2005. The response of the police and the media angered many British Bangladeshis, who felt Muslims had been unfairly criticized. "Government ministers spoke a lot about British values and the duty to integrate," says Hasan, a banker in Bradford. "That implies that there is a fixed set of values or way of life that we must sign up to and we as a community somehow dropped the ball in that respect. We can't all be carbon copies."

Despite a century of turmoil, the Bangladeshi community has carved out a place for itself in the mosaic of British society. In the process they have helped change the lot of their friends and families back here in Bangladesh. Both Britain and Bangladesh are evolving. Changing times mean new challenges and fresh opportunities for the diaspora.

Standing on the bank of the Thames, you could almost hear the Lascars urging them on. ■



The journey began on the serene waters of the Surma.