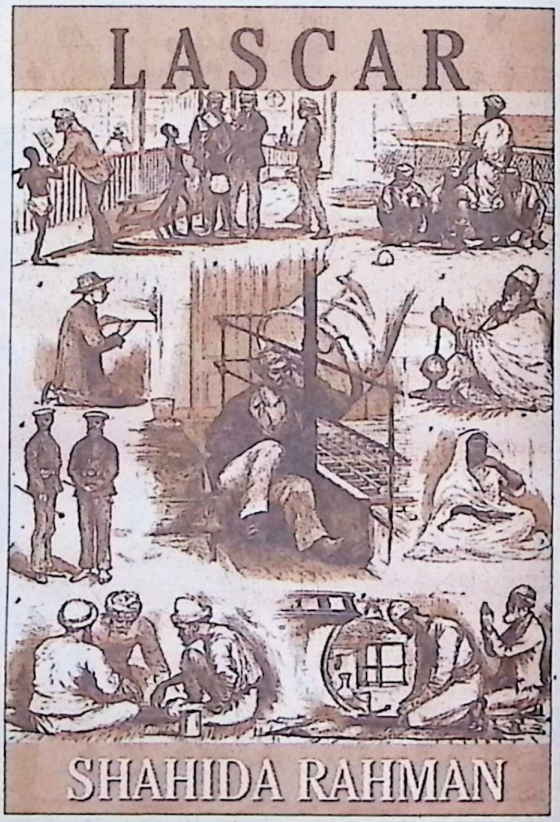
A Sylheti in Nineteenth Century London

FAKRUL ALAM

It was Michael H. Fisher's 2004 book *Counterflows to Colonialism* that first alerted its readers to the history of people from the Indian subcontinent visiting or settling down in England as early as the seventeenth century. Improbable though it would appear, there were also hundreds of Indians who had either visited England or become integrated into English society by the eighteenth century, that is to say, even before the days of the Raj. And once the English had consolidated their presence in India, there were reasons of trade as well as empire to impel thousands of intrepid or merely desperate Indians to taste life in Great Britain, for a while or forever.

In particular, Fisher's book traces in considerable and fascinating detail the history of lascar settlements in England from the seventeenth century onwards. The word "lascar", Fisher indicates connoted Indian sailors or labourers who had joined naval labour gangs and had been recruited as a block. It is obvious from Fisher's work that what was a trickle in that century became a stream by the time Queen Victoria had ascended the British throne. In other words, well before the Sylheti diaspora that had become a phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century, it was entirely likely that there were quite a few Bengalis settled in London or even the English countryside.

Now Shahida Rahman has woven an absorbing historical yarn about one such Sylheti Bengali sailor's extended stay in London in the mid-nineteenth century in *Lascar*. Courtesy of an online interview, one learns that Rahman is a Brit of Sylheti origin, who has lived in Cambridge all her life. Even though her father settled down in Cambridge in the nineteen fifties, he was descended from a Lascar and stories of the Lascar ancestor were, quite naturally, part of Rahman's family tradition. But not content with the stories she had grown up with, Rahman began researching the subject of Lascars in Britain until she came up with a novel that was eventually accepted for publication in England and came out there in June 2012.



Lascar
By Shahida Rahman
Stoney Stanton
Leicestershire, England, 2012
286 pages

Rahman's novel is about Ayan Miah who is like all Lascars in that he had volunteered to be one because serving on an English ship appeared to be a better option at one point of his life than what his own country had to offer him. The novel begins dramatically though with Ayan in prison-like conditions in a ship called *The Bengal*, for life on board for an Indian sailor in a British trading ship was never much better than his life on land. But Ayan had been tempted to be a Lascar because his father had been such a voyager too, despite the warning sounded to him by his brother Kazi that he was fated to contempt and racist slurs on board