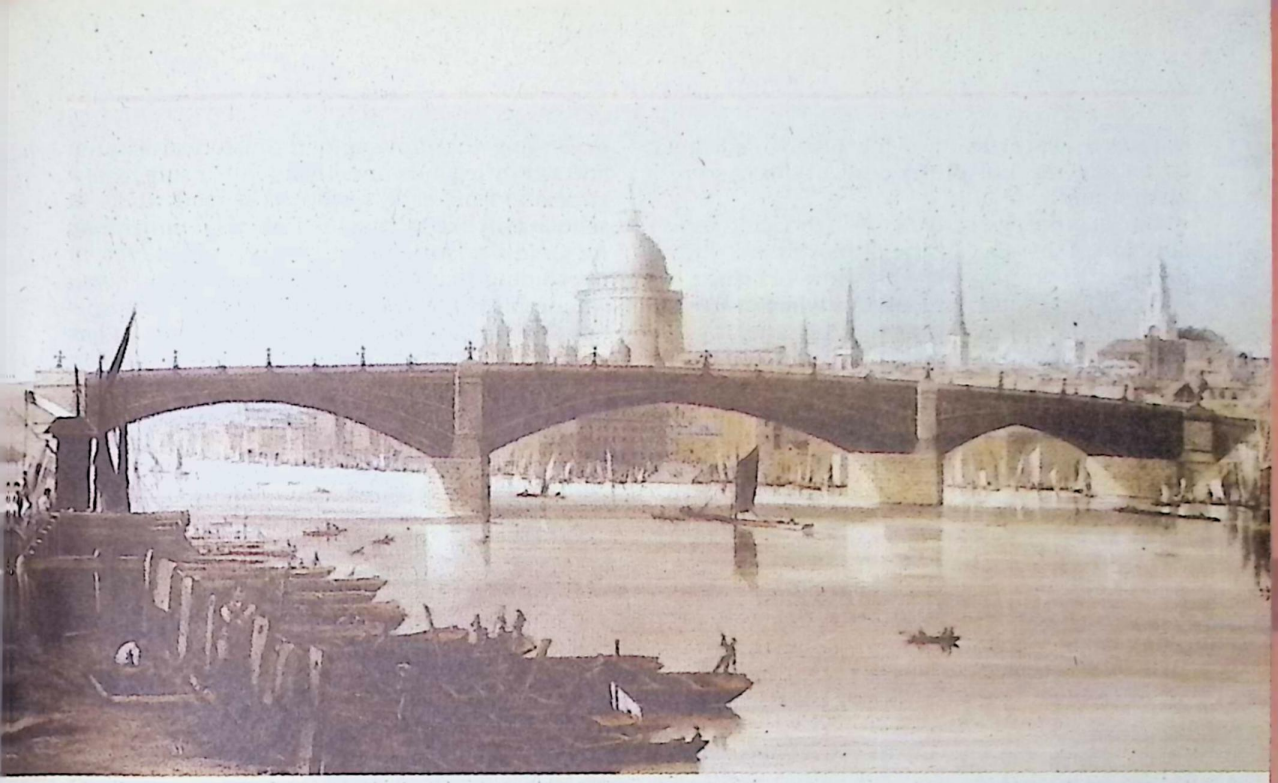


English ships. The brothers, readers learn through flashbacks, had to struggle to make a living in Sylhet selling rice and Kazi had even become an addict to escape the harshness of life in that part of India then. This is why Ayan leaves his brother behind and goes to Calcutta, rather than "accept fate without a whimper" as Kazi did.

But life on board *The Bengal* proves even more hellish than life in Sylhet. Ayan, like many hundreds of real-life Lascars before him, deserts the ship in London, along with another young sailor called Akbar, both opting to be free in an alien city than endure further hardships on the ship. At least initially though, survival here meant resorting to begging. Fortunately for the duo, and like innumerable illegal immigrants who still have to negotiate a foreign land any which way they can, Ayan and Akbar chance upon people who help him to survive. These are men and women like him from other countries who had learnt to cope with adversity after finding themselves stranded in England. The duo thus develop ties with an Italian woman called Louisa, who had chosen to sing her way out of the barriers posed by exile, and soon Ayan learns to accompany her as an entertainer on drums and even sing Bengali songs in nineteenth century London!

Lascar is only a medium-sized novel, but it is full of twists and turns. Eventually Akbar dies and Louisa wanders out of Ayan's life as fortuitously as she had walked into it. Ayan now finds himself alone in the huge and forbidding city. Another chance encounter with a kind missionary leads him to a businessman called Lionel Jennings who becomes his first English benefactor. Jennings gives him an English name, Albert, and treats him kindly, and helps him learn English. But racism is endemic in London and despite his newly acquired skills Ayan becomes a street cleaner subject to racist attacks. He is rescued from one such attack by Phoebe Hilary, his benefactor's niece, who is so fascinated by him that she declares her intention to marry the Indian. But the prospects of an inter-racial marriage in the family drive Phoebe's father into torturing Ayan. Phoebe, however, commits herself totally to him and the couple decides to live together as husband and wife, albeit in a marriage that depended on mutual consent than on the law. Eventually, they even find a "government appointed Quadi" to sanctify the marriage, for a subtext of Shahida Rahman's novel

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.