

AN UNTOLD HISTORY OF BENGALI Migrants in Malaya and Singapore

A sizeable Bengali diaspora became visible in British Malaya during the late nineteenth century. It gradually created social and cultural spaces alongside other migrating communities, such as the Chinese, Tamils, and Burmese.

GAZI MIZANUR RAHMAN

During the 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of Bangladeshi migrants, comprising mainly unskilled workers, led to a widespread perception of Bengali migrants as itinerant labourers and temporary workers in the Malay Peninsula. However, one may ask: Did Bengalis not migrate to the Malay world before the 1980s? The answer to this question can be found on every page of the book *In the Malay World: A Spatial History of a Bengali Transnational Community*, published by Cambridge University Press. Despite the significant historical mobility of Bengalis in the Malay Archipelago and their contemporary prominence, as reflected in the more than a million-strong Bengali diaspora in the region, their historical studies remain almost

a hierarchy with four harbour managers representing Gujaratis, Bengalis, Malays, and East Asians. The Portuguese and Dutch East India Companies colonised Malacca in 1511 and 1641, respectively. Malacca was ceded to the British in 1824 through the Anglo-Dutch Treaty.

With the arrival of Europeans in the Bay of Bengal waters, Bengalis were introduced to Malaya through various avenues, including enslavement and later as imperial subjects. Europeans integrated Bengali enslaved people into the global slave-trading network. During the 1620s, the Dutch frequently visited Chittagong to purchase Bengali enslaved people captured by the marauding Portuguese, known as Feringhi. It is estimated that approximately 100,000 enslaved people, and possibly more, were taken by the Dutch from various regions, including the Bengal-Arakan border. The Dutch employed them as domestic servants or agricultural labourers in their colonies.

Colonial Connectivity and Bengali Mobility

With the establishment of the British colonial administration and trans-regional networks in the 1830s, Bengali mobility into the Malay world took a relatively stable form. The maritime Bay of Bengal and land routes became robust avenues of mutual communication between 1830 and 1851. During this period, the Straits Settlements (consisting of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore) were administered from Calcutta. In the following years, the Straits Settlements came under the direct control of the Governor-General of India, an arrangement that continued until it became a crown colony in 1867. Moreover, the print media of



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Mushahid Ali (b. 1941), a Bangladeshi descendant.

transition from one sector to another, where they met other Bengali workers.

"We came from Taltala Village under Balagonj police station in Sylhet. My father, Munshi Asmat Ali, and my uncle Muniruddin came to British Malaya in 1922. They worked in unskilled jobs along the west coast of Malaya; from Penang, they went to Batu Gajah in Perak to seek work in the tin mines as boilermen or engine drivers. Eventually, they went to Ampang, Selangor, where there were other people from East Bengal, particularly Sylhet. They worked there for a while before moving south to Johor. While Asmat Ali found work as a boilerman in Kota Tinggi at Sungei Besi Tin Mine, Muniruddin went to Singapore in 1939 to seek work at the British military base and eventually settled there. In those days, the British encouraged the people of Sylhet to come to Malaya."

Mushahid Ali, son of Munshi Asmat Ali (1893-1982), was born and grew up in Johor. He moved to Singapore in 1949 to pursue better education. After finishing college, he started working as a reporter for a newspaper and later worked at Radio Television Singapore from 1963 to 1966. He resumed his studies at the University of Singapore in 1966, graduated, and eventually joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He served as a diplomat in seven countries, including Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, England, Japan, and Cambodia, and retired in 2001. Presently, he is working as a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University. His three offspring work

Tamils, and Burmese. Mirza Abdul Majid (1906-1973), commonly known as M. A. Majid, was a towering figure among the Bengali diasporic community in the Malay world. He migrated from Sylhet to Singapore in the 1920s and married a Chinese woman. He was well-known in Singapore's public life and had good connections with colonial administrators. In 1938, M. A. Majid took steps to secure the interests of the working classes, including the Bengalis. He noted the grievances, injustices, and unemployment faced by Bengali seamen in Malaya. He urged foreign shipowners to improve the working conditions of Asian seamen. In the 1930s, more than 60 per cent of Bengali lascars remained unemployed indefinitely in Singapore, and the Master Attendants' Office was indifferent to their grievances.

In her oral testimony, Shafiya Khatoon recalls how Majid and his Chinese wife became a key example of a transnational family in the Malay Peninsula. Majid and his wife, Hamidah Binte Abdullah Sani, had ten offspring. In 1965, the eldest daughter of Majid, Khatoon, married Kamsani Hasan, a mixed Malay. Hasan's father was an Indonesian Malay, and his mother was a Bruneian who had a connection to the Brunei royal family by marriage. Hasan's maternal aunt, Mrs. Kadayang Amas Ampuan Salleh (commonly known in the family as Maskatun), was the first wife of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (the twenty-seventh Sultan of Brunei Darussalam). Khatoon visited her husband's relatives in Brunei on several occasions from 1969 onward. Hasan had a close connection with

government system in Singapore. After the Legislative Council election in 1948, Majid formed a political party, the Singapore Labour Party (SLP), to protect labourers' interests. He was the 'principal organiser' of the party. Majid had good connections with prominent contemporary politicians, including David Marshall, Tengku Abdul Rahman, and Lim Yew Hock. They used to visit Majid's house and discuss contemporary political issues in British Malaya.

Mrs. Hena Sinha was born and brought up in Burma. After her marriage, A. C. Sinha and Mrs. Sinha, along with her mother-in-law, disembarked from Rangoon Port for Singapore. Her daughter-in-law, Dolly Sinha Davenport, recollected her married life and described her transnational family in the following words:

"I have three offspring. Ranjit was the father of two kids. One kid is with Davenport [after the death of Ranjit, Mrs. Sinha married Brand Davenport]. My eldest daughter is settled in the USA. She got married to an American who had two sons. My son, Robin Sinha, is a doctor, settled in Singapore, and married a Chinese girl. The youngest daughter, Roya, is settled in Singapore.... She got married to a boy who is mixed-race, mother Chinese and father Irish. Brand [her second husband] was an Anglo-Indian. His father was pure English, and his mother was mixed-race."

During the postcolonial period, Dolly Sinha was popular among Bangladeshi migrants. She completed her Bar-at-Law in 1977 and practised at the Singapore Court for nineteen years. She opened a law firm named Dolly Sinha Davenport and Co. She recalls that when she was practising law in the 1980s, people called her office the 'Little Bangladesh High Commission' because most of the injured or maltreated Bengali workers came to her office for legal assistance.

Bengali Associations and their Religious and Cultural Activities

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Bengali diaspora had formed various social, religious, and cultural associations. The Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities established several associations and initiated many social, religious, and cultural activities during the interwar period in British Malaya. The Malayan Bengalee Association (MBA), one of the earliest Bengali associations, began functioning in Malaya in the 1920s. Its members came from the same ethnic group and language. Fresh Bengali migrants and the descendants of those who had arrived mainly from Calcutta, Dacca, Chittagong, and Midnapore were also members of the MBA. In 1952, the MBA was formally registered, and H. K. Choudhury was its first elected President (1951-1956). After the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the MBA renamed itself the 'Malaysian Bengalee Association'.

Bengali Muslim migrants and their descendants founded the Bangiya Moslem Sammilani (the Bengal Muslim Association) in Singapore in the 1920s. The Sammilani organised various social and religious events and programmes. In 1935, they celebrated the silver jubilee of George V (1865-1936) at Rangoon Road in Singapore with a three-day-long programme. Most of the participants were Bengali lascars, merchants, and seamen. Doa selamat (prayers) was offered for the king and his empire at the Queen Street Mosque on the first day. A Bangla music concert was held on the second day, and on the last day, a special dinner was served at M. A. Majid's house, who was the secretary of the Sammilani. More than 150 guests attended the dinner. Majid wrote a congratulatory message to the Viceroy of India at this event.

Though the Bengalis from West Bengal of India and Bangladesh share common cultures, including language and food habits, they split into two communities in Malaysia and Singapore in the late 1970s. The primary reason for this separation was the independence of Bangladesh, which divided the Bangla-speaking community along national lines.

Based on a range of primary sources, including oral history interviews, the book reveals an untold history of transregional connectivity between South and Southeast Asia and the making of a diasporic space that vividly resonates today. It fills a gap in the existing historiography of Bengali historical migration and their space-making in present-day Malaysia and Singapore.

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Muniruddin and his wife.

PHOTO COURTESY: GAZI MIZANUR RAHMAN.



M A Majid and his wife.

PHOTO COURTESY: FAZLUR RAHMAN KAMSANI, GRANDSON OF M A MAJID.

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unseen. Three aspects are significant in examining the history of Bengali migration and their transnational community. The first aspect includes the background of Bengali migration, processes, and governance during the colonial period. The second set of issues addresses the identity of Bengalis among many Indian ethnic communities, their demographic profile, and the historical challenges and opportunities they faced. Thirdly, the contributions of Bengalis to the Malay world's economy, culture, and civil society, as well as their role in forming a cosmopolitan space in the Northeast Indian Ocean region.

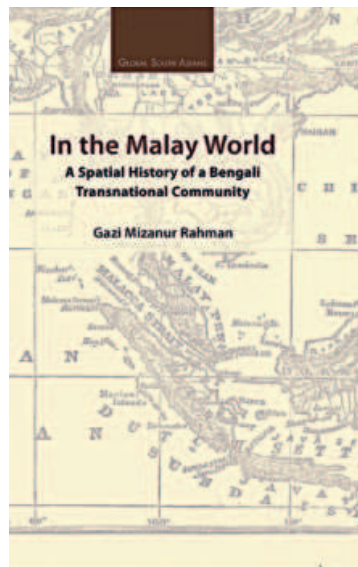
Pre-colonial Trajectory Across the Bay of Bengal and the Malay Sea

"A thousand years have I been roaming the world's pathways/ From Ceylon to Malaya in the darkness of night across oceans/ Much have I travelled; in the grey universe of Bimbisara, Ashoka A moment or two of peace she gave me, Natore's Banalata Sen" ('Banalata Sen', a poem by Jibanananda Das, translated by Sugata Bose).

Jibanananda Das, a leading Bengali poet of the twentieth century, never travelled to the Malay Peninsula. However, in an allegorical verse in his famous poem 'Banalata Sen', an ode to the eponymous eternal woman, Das expressed that he had travelled for thousands of years from Sri Lanka to the Malay world to attain a moment of peace. His literary mind knew no bounds. Though his journey was a fantasy of love, it gives us a sense of the constant flow of Bengali mobility and culture between the two coasts of the Bay of Bengal and the Malay Sea. Factually, Bengalis voyaged to the Malay Archipelago for a thousand years. This truth fuelled the imagination of Bengali poets, as reflected in Das's verse.

Bengali connections with the Malay world go back centuries. Bengalis have been travelling widely in Southeast Asia since about the third century BCE. During the pre-colonial era, the primary connections were the circulation of goods and ideas. Chittagong port was prominent for trade and cultural dissemination. Anthony Reid and R. C. Majumder have shown that Buddhism and Islam were disseminated from Bengal to Southeast Asia. Majumder and Ganguly suggested that Bengal was extensively involved in developing cultural links between the diverse civilisations of Eastern and Southeastern Asia for nearly 1,500 years. In this respect, Chittagong and Malacca ports were crucial in exchanging cultures and commodities.

Bengali merchants conducted business in the Malay Peninsula and assisted in managing the Malacca Port at some point. A Malay nobleman, Parameswara (1344-c. 1414), established the Malacca Sultanate and founded a port in 1400. To avoid petty corruption, he established

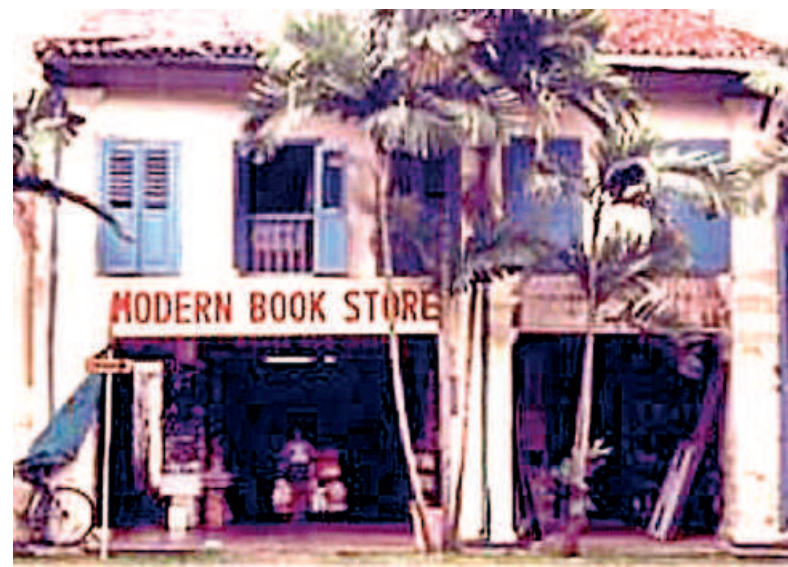


the Straits Settlements offered 'soft' connectivity by either publishing news from Bengal or reproducing reports from Bengal newspapers.

However, a particular issue that has been encountered relates to identifying Bengalis among other South Asian migrants. Colonial records refer to migrants from different parts of South Asia using generic terms such as 'Indian', 'native of India', 'eastern Indian', and, to some extent, 'aliens' and 'others'. The term 'Bengali' was bundled with non-Bengalis, such as 'Sikh', 'Hindustani', or 'Punjabi'. Such terminological and categorical ambiguities about Bengalis hinder the remaking of the history of Bengali migration. Bengalis provide examples of mobility as convicts, indentured or kangany labourers, and 'free' migrants under British imperialism. Both colonial governments in Bengal and the Straits Settlements regulated Bengali migrations.

Governance of Migration and Bengali Professionals

British Malaya was rich in tin, rubber, coffee, oil, and other minerals, creating job opportunities and drawing a multiracial group of people from neighbouring areas, including China, India, and Bengal. Bengalis were involved in both professional and non-professional jobs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, they worked as clerks, doctors, lawyers, accountants, coolies, shopkeepers, boatmen, security guards, vendors (bread-sellers), and lascars. Bengali specialists in obstetrics and gynaecology served with dedication in British Malaya. K. C. Sinha migrated from Calcutta to Singapore in 1912 and joined as a general practitioner at Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital. His son and grandson became prominent obstetricians and gynaecologists in Singapore. Members of the Sinha family served at the Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital for almost fifty years. Mushahid Ali, a descendant of a Bengali migrant, recalls his family's involvement in tin mining and their



Modern Book Store, 1939.

PHOTO COURTESY: NOORUL ISLAM.

in Singapore and the USA.

In his travel account, Ramnath Biswas, a globetrotter who started peddling his bicycle from Singapore in the 1930s, wrote about a Bengali grocery shop in Seremban, where Bengali migrants used to gather. According to Anwarul Haque's oral testimony, his father, Muniruddin, was an electrician and a supplier of electrical equipment in the Serangoon area. After the Second World War, Muniruddin's family resided in a shophouse on Bras Basah Road that served as both a home and a trading centre.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Bengalis owned a few bookshops. For instance, Noorul Islam's father started a bookshop named 'Modern Book Store' around 1938, located near Muniruddin's electrical equipment store.

The Making of a Diasporic Space: Socio-political Dimensions and Civil Society

A sizeable Bengali diaspora became visible in British Malaya during the late nineteenth century. It gradually created social and cultural spaces alongside other migrating communities, such as the Chinese,

his three maternal cousins, namely Y. A. M. Pengiran Anak Datin Seri Setia Hj Siti Saerah Al-Marhum Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (Belabab Basar, 1928-2013), Y. A. M. Pg Anak Siti Zubaidah Al-Marhum Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (Belabab Tangah, c. 1932-1986), and Y. A. M. Pengiran Anak Datin Seri Setia Hajah Siti Halimah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin (Belabab Damit, 1935-2009). Khatoon attended the wedding of Saerah, the daughter of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin, at Darul Hana (Old Royal Palace) and her funeral. The twenty-ninth Sultan of Brunei Darussalam also attended the janazah (funeral) prayer for Saerah.

M. A. Majid was not a trained solicitor, but he had knowledge of various legal issues and helped seamen and others in the court of Singapore. After WWII, Majid transitioned into national politics and stood in municipal commissioner and legislative councillor elections. In 1948, two candidates from the Progressive Party and Majid, an independent candidate, contested the Municipal South-West constituency in the first Legislative Council election. Majid endeavoured to achieve a self-