

# The world of the Sylheti seamen in the Age of Empire, from the late eighteenth century to 1947

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## Abstract

*This article examines the maritime activities and emigration of Muslim Sylhetis, from what today is north-eastern Bangladesh. Among the Bengali people, Sylhetis were the pioneers in crossing the sea in the Age of Empire. In their voyages, they worked as crewmen on merchant ships, and then began to settle abroad, mainly in Britain and the USA. Some of those who settled in Britain started restaurants and lodging houses. One of the unexplored questions of South Asian historiography is: why was it the Sylhetis who became seamen and emigrants, even though they lived about 300 miles away from the sea? This article traces the socioeconomic, religious, and ecological environment of Sylhetis to understand their transnational mobility, notably within the increasingly interconnected realms of the British empire.*

**Keywords** Bengali migration, Islam, land tenure, seamen, Sylhet

## Introduction

Today, the Sylhetis are considered to be a ‘truly global family’, because they are dispersed all over the world, with a strong concentration in Britain. Despite the fact that they originally lived some 300 miles from the sea, in what is today the north-eastern corner of Bangladesh, they became seamen in the Age of Empire. This article argues that this was partly because Sylhetis already had centuries of experience in building and operating boats in their inland floodplain. Many boatmen lost their livelihood when railways and steamships largely displaced ‘country boats’ in the carrying trade in the late nineteenth century. At the same time, Western merchants required Asian crews for their ships, and Sylhet was one of the principal areas where they could be recruited.

Other factors have been put forward as contributing to Sylheti emigration. Small independent land tenures declined, and population pressure on land worsened with demographic growth and the establishment of tea estates. There were cultural values celebrating mobility, especially local traditions of pioneers moving into the jungle to convert it to rice paddies, and of wandering Arab holy men bringing Islam. Although these latter factors may not explain Sylhet’s specific role in emigration, they are part of the migrants’ way of seeing their world. Sugata Bose writes of the history of interregional networks of

capitalists and labourers, soldiers and sailors, patriots and expatriates, pilgrims and poets. He argues that an analysis of the flow of goods and money needs to be balanced by an interpretation of the perceptions and experiences of the people who were key actors in the Indian Ocean arena in modern times. He rightly points out that ‘By bringing together the histories of mobile peoples and some of the commodities with which their fortunes were linked, the larger history will be more richly, and truly, narrated.’<sup>1</sup>

The historical study of Sylheti seamen remains underdeveloped from a South Asian perspective. Surprisingly, Bose has not written about them. Ravi Ahuja discusses the expanding employment of Indian workers in merchant ships during the interwar years, but he focuses more on the political and economic context of imperialism than on the seafarers themselves.<sup>2</sup> G. Balachandran examines the recruitment and management of Indian seamen, as well as their social and regional origins, voyages, work, wages, and patterns of resistance. He shows the importance of Indian labour in the context of European merchant shipping. Nonetheless, he deals little with the origins of Bengali seafarers, and does not discuss the reasons that pushed Sylhetis to go to sea.<sup>3</sup> So this article makes a modest attempt to explore the South Asian world of Sylheti seamen, and how they became involved in global seafaring and migration.

The existing literature on Sylhetis in Britain rarely considers their maritime roots, and even treats them as latecomers among South Asians. The Sylheti community in Britain has recently attracted scholarly attention, as concerns with political Islam have deepened, but authors pay little attention to the historical roots of the community. Katy Gardner produced a monograph in the early 1990s, which is a study of emigration from a village in Sylhet to Britain. Later she argued that narratives play an important role in the formation of both collective and individual identity.<sup>4</sup> Sarah Glynn has looked at political mobilization from a cultural and organizational perspective, and relates ‘the issues of Islamism and secularism to a broader socioeconomic, political and ideological framework’. She also notes the growth of a new revivalist, internationally linked Islam in the East End.<sup>5</sup> Finally, John Eade has pointed to the entry of second-generation secular activists into the mainstream political arena during the 1980s, and has stressed the importance of Islamic identity.<sup>6</sup> Using a historical approach, I challenge this neglect of origins, examining the reasons for the voyages of Sylheti seafarers in the Age of Empire, and the causes and nature of their settlement abroad.

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- 1 Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 79.
  - 2 Ravi Ahuja, ‘Mobility and containment: the voyages of South Asian seamen, c. 1900–1960’, *International Review of Social History*, 51, 2006, pp. 111–41.
  - 3 G. Balachandran, *Globalizing labour? Indian seafarers and world shipping, c.1870–1945*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.
  - 4 Katy Gardner, *Global migrants, local lives: travel and transformation in rural Bangladesh*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Katy Gardner, *Age, narrative and migration: the life course and life histories of Bengali elders in London*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
  - 5 Sarah Glynn, ‘The home and the world: Bengali political mobilization in London’s East End and a comparison with the Jews’ past’, PhD thesis, University College London, 2003, p. 14; Sarah Glynn, ‘Bengali Muslims: the new East End radicals?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25, 6, 2002, pp. 969–88.
  - 6 John Eade, *The politics of community: the Bangladeshi community in East London*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1989, p. 2.

## Combining written and oral sources

On the basis of combining archival sources, vernacular writings, family papers, and oral history, I have sought to obtain a perspective on the world of Sylheti seamen in the Age of Empire. Although this article is largely based on archival and secondary materials, non-archival sources, particularly oral history, have helped to substantiate the analysis, and have enabled a 'bottom-up' approach in examining certain issues.

The late Caroline Adams was not an academic, but she was a pioneer in gathering oral history from the Sylheti community in Britain during her career as a social worker. Over twenty-five long years, she gained the friendship of many Sylhetis, and became fluent in the Sylheti dialect of Bengali. Her oral study was the first influential exploration of Sylheti seamen's involvement in two world wars, and on their post-war settlement in Britain. In the 1980s, she investigated the way of life of Sylheti seamen, and their diasporic experiences, from the perspective of individuals who had lived that history.<sup>7</sup> Adams' papers were bequeathed to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives. They partly relate to her book, but there are additional audio cassette tapes of interviews that were not used for that book.<sup>8</sup> These interviews provide an invaluable insight into the experiences of seafaring, collaboration on the high seas, post-war migration, and continuous ties with England.

Following up on Adams' work, I conducted in-depth interviews with some Sylhetis in the East End of London over several sessions between 2006 and 2008, to establish a context and a history from the perspective of the 'insider'. The interviewees narrated the diasporic experience of Sylhetis of different generations, recounting what had happened in their lives, and in their communities over more than half a century. Nurul Islam and Mushtaq Qureshi both came to Britain to study law in the early 1950s, on the last passenger ship from Karachi. Although Mushtaq Qureshi had been a British citizen for nearly fifty-three years, he still considered himself to be a Sylheti-Bengali. Many of his close relatives were seamen. Nurul Islam wrote the first vernacular history of the Sylheti diaspora and could narrate the living history of his community under three flags: the late British period, the Pakistani period, and the Bangladeshi period. Mr Islam's two maternal uncles died in the Second World War. Hasant Mohammad Husain came to Britain in 1973 for higher study, and later settled there. His ancestors also visited Britain before 1947, and left stories connected to Britain. I further interviewed Salikur Rahaman, the son of a British war hero, who handed over some documents on his father, Samir Uallah. Interviewees narrated their own experiences, as well as recounting what they had heard about their immediate ancestors' lives.<sup>9</sup>

A literary tradition of writing community history is another feature of Sylheti culture, which has proved useful to this study. Yousuf Choudhury contributed two such studies, drawing on his experience as an activist. He wrote about the social history of Sylhetis in

7 Caroline Adams, *Across seven seas and thirteen rivers: life stories of pioneer Sylheti settlers in Britain*, London: Thap Books, 1987.

8 Caroline Adams' 'Letters, tapes and type transcriptions files' are held under the classmark 'P/ADM' in Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Bancroft Road, London (henceforth THLA, P/ADM). Also in this file are Caroline Adams, 'Navy men: lives of early Bangladeshi settlers in Britain', undated typescript and audio cassettes, 1980s.

9 Interviewees included: Nurul Islam (seventy-seven when interviewed), Mushtaq Qureshi (seventy-five when interviewed), Mrs Badrun Nessa Uddin (eighty-one when interviewed), Dr Hasant Mohammad Husain (sixty when interviewed), and Shamim Azad (sixty when interviewed).

Britain, particularly those who started working in the East Midlands in the early 1940s. One of Choudhury's books appeared under the title *Sons of empire*, which is suggestive of the community's historical roots.<sup>10</sup>

There is also much to be learned from autobiographies, even if care needs to be taken with such 'ego documents', as with any other primary source.<sup>11</sup> Keeping this in mind, two autobiographies have been explored. Borjendra Narayan Chowdhury was one of the leading Zamindars of Sylhet, and a prominent Congress leader in Assam in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Jyoti Basu, a former chief minister of West Bengal, studied law in Britain and was active as a communist militant, organizing Indian seamen in east London in the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

## Wetlands and boats in Sylhet

Sylhet, about 300 miles north-east of Calcutta, is a country of hillocks, jungles, and plains, the latter full of *hōar* and *bheel*. *Hōar* refers to a wetland ecosystem, a bowl or saucer-shaped shallow depression. A *bheel* is a small permanent water body within a *hōar*, occupying the lowest part of the depression. Covering a total area of some 6,000 square kilometres, this is considered to be the largest single inland depression in South Asia. The rivers of Sylhet descend from the high and extremely wet mountains of Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, and join together to form the Meghna. These powerful rivers are primarily responsible for developing the low floodplain of Sylhet, which remains deeply flooded for about eight months in a year. In fact, during the rainy season, the Sylhet region turns into a vast inland 'sea', and the villages appear as islands.<sup>14</sup>

Sylhet was thus a mosaic of wetland habitats, including rivers, tributaries, irrigation canals, and large areas of seasonally cultivated land. The zone contained about three hundred *hōar* and *bheel*, varying in size from a few hectares to several thousand. The wetlands were rich in fish. When the floods retreated and the lowlands of Sylhet turned into a set of lakes, vast areas became available for temporary cultivation. The major crop was rice, planted from November to January as fields dried out, and harvested before the heavy flood started in June. Owing to this ecological setting, many Sylheti people were boatmen in the rainy season, and peasants in the dry season. Rich peasants used to store surplus paddy rice and take it to different parts of Bengal during the rainy season.<sup>15</sup>

A specific boat-building tradition therefore developed in the region. Jean Deloche has written about the origins of these boatmen and their ships. In the second volume of his great work, he focuses on various types of water transport in precolonial South Asia, and shows

10 Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire: oral history from the Bangladeshi seamen who served on British ships during the 1939–1945 war*, Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1995; Yousuf Choudhury, *The routes and tales of the Bangladeshi settlers*, Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1993.

11 Colin Heywood, *Growing up in France: from the ancien regime to the Third Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 32–4.

12 Brojendra Narayan Chowdhury, *Smriti and Pratiti: an autobiography*, Calcutta: Oriental Book Company, 1982.

13 Jyoti Basu, *Jata dur mone pore (As far as I remember)*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1998.

14 C. Strickland, *Deltaic formation with special reference to the hydrographic processes of the Ganges and Brahmaputra*, Calcutta: Longmans & Co., 1940.

15 Strickland, *Deltaic formation*; Chowdhury, *Smriti and Pratiti*, pp. 113–14.

that waterways were the backbone of long-distance transport and trade. In a separate article he also argues that a special pattern of life was imposed on Bengal by the great rivers, and that a variety of boats developed in the region in ancient and medieval times.<sup>16</sup>

This tradition can be traced back to the seventh century CE, when the kings of Kamrupa (Assam) kept their navy on the 'freshwater sea' around Sylhet. In three engraved copperplates of Sylhet, dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries, there are also mentions of a naval base and warships.<sup>17</sup> Two leading experts on ancient Bengal, Nihar Ranjan Roy and Ranabir Chakrabarty, noted that the people of ancient Sylhet used wooden boats and canoes as a means of transport and trade, in both rivers and seas.<sup>18</sup> Useful timber abounded in the forests of Sylhet, and Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan traveller who visited South Asia in the middle of fourteenth century, saw innumerable boats in the area.<sup>19</sup> Arab traders collected perfume, aloe, sandalwood, teak, and fabrics produced in the region, and carried these away from Sylhet.<sup>20</sup> The Portuguese account of Duarte Barbosa shows that a major trade route led from Sylhet to East Asia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> In the sixteenth century, during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar, warships constructed in Sylhet were famous throughout the subcontinent.<sup>22</sup>

One extensive written source from the end of the early modern period is the journal of Robert Lindsay, who was in Sylhet from 1778 to 1790 as an administrator. He wrote that on entering the region he went across a *hōar* that was not less than one hundred miles across, and he had to use his sea compass and telescope to find his way.<sup>23</sup> He colourfully depicts the ways in which this Eastern frontier district of the Indian subcontinent abounded in natural resources, as a land of water, jungle, and people. He described the scenic beauty of Sylhet's countryside as an Eden, commenting: 'a more romantic or more beautiful situation could not be found than the one then before me ... I felt as if transplanted into one of the regions of Paradise.'<sup>24</sup> In his account of his famous journey from Dhaka to Sylhet, Lindsay showed that, in crossing the country, he frequently 'passed through fields of wild rice, forming the most beautiful verdure', and the ship was 'encompassed by a sea of green'.<sup>25</sup>

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- 16 Jean Deloche, *Transport and communications in India prior to steam locomotion*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993; Jean Deloche, 'Boats and ships in Bengal terracotta arts', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 78, 1991, pp. 2–3.
- 17 Kamalakanta Gupta, *Copper-plates of Sylhet*, Sylhet: Lipika Enterprises, 1967, p. 7.
- 18 Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba (History of the Bengali people)*, Calcutta: De's Publication, 1949, p. 152; Ranabir Chakrabarty, 'Avinna Devata, Vinna Mat: Prachin Srihatter Ekti Brahmapur (One God in different settings: a village of God in ancient Sylhet)', *Academy Patrika*, 1, 1, 1991, pp. 30–40.
- 19 Iban Battutah, *Rehla of Iban Battutah*, tr. Mahdi Husain, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1953, pp. 238–9.
- 20 Achyut Charan Choudhury, *Sreehatter itibritta (A history of Sylhet)*, vol. 5, Calcutta: Sree Uendra Lal Choudhury, 1910, pp. 24–5; Abul Fazal, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vols. 2–3, tr. H. S. Jarrett, New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1949, pp. 136–7.
- 21 Duarte Barbosa, *The book of Duarte Barbosa*, tr. M. L. Dames, vol. 2, London: Hakluyt Society, 1918, p. 147.
- 22 Achyut Chaudhury, *Sreehatter itibritta*, p. 28; Dewan Mohammad Azraf, *Sylhete Islam (Islam in Sylhet)*, Dhaka: Noawroj Books, 1995, p. 29.
- 23 Robert Lindsay, 'Anecdotes of an Indian life', in Alexander Crawford Lindsay, ed., *Lives of the Lindsays*, vol. 4, Wigan: C. S. Simms, 1840, p. 26.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

With the help of local knowledge and expertise, Lindsay was able to build many ships: 'Several ingenious workmen both in wood, iron, ivory and silver, attached themselves to my service, and afforded me a source of much amusement. We became also in great repute as elegant boat builders; in this department we particularly excelled, and it had the effect of leading me to the building of ships of burthen.'<sup>26</sup> He employed Sylhetis to construct a beautiful vessel, called the *Augusta*, which was 400 tons burthen, and was pierced for eighteen guns. He argued that it was no doubt a wonderful sight – the first and the largest ever built in that part of the world. Lindsay continued that he 'puzzled many a nautical man with my story of building a ship of four hundred tons burthen, three hundred miles from sea ... and all perfectly true'.<sup>27</sup>

Sylhet was thus an ideal spot for the construction of boats, which were used to carry goods such as limestone and rice to the port of Calcutta, to other parts of Bengal, and even to Southeast Asia. Lindsay was in Sylhet for twelve years, and he found it to be a place of large trees, where timber was available for making boats, and people were good shipbuilders. He built a fleet of eighteen ships with the help of local workers.<sup>28</sup> The wood consisted of local varieties, including teak, suitable for the construction of ocean-going ships. Evidence suggests that one of the export items of Sylhet to the outside world at the time was timber.<sup>29</sup>

In the late eighteenth century, the two great staples of commerce were limestone and elephants. In no part of the Indian subcontinent was limestone found as perfectly pure as it was in Sylhet, and Calcutta was chiefly supplied from here. Lindsay's predecessor, William Makepeace Thackeray, the grandfather of the famous novelist of that name, was the first 'Resident' of the East India Company in Sylhet. In 1772 he contemplated with delight the possibility of 'commercial speculation'. Having surveyed the country, he recognized that the greatest source of profit would be the deposits of limestone, used for building the fort and the rising city of Calcutta. Thackeray was also engaged in supplying elephants for the British armed forces. He admitted that the trade in limestone and elephants became a major source of wealth for him, and in fact became the foundation of his fortune.<sup>30</sup>

Lindsay wrote that he found Armenians, Greeks, and 'low Europeans' occupied with the limestone quarry, but he effectively competed with them through his control of imported cowry shells, used locally as money.<sup>31</sup> He mentioned that he carried out business regularly with Calcutta, and on a few occasions also with Southeast Asia. He noted that the *Augusta* was destined for the Straits of Malacca, with a valuable cargo of opium, and that it would eventually reach Macau in China.<sup>32</sup> Other ships of his returned to Sylhet from the Maldives, loaded with cowries, Sylhet's only imports, carried by boats that had taken rice and fish to the islands.<sup>33</sup> Lindsay mentioned that he employed local people as his partners, and that

26 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–2.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

29 Achyut Choudhury, *Sreehatter itibritta*, pp. 24–5.

30 'Thackeray: ancestors of his who were fighters and administrators in India', *New York Times*, 6 February 1897.

31 Lindsay, 'Anecdotes', pp. 41, 45.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 84–8.

33 Sylhet District Records, National Archives of Bangladesh, 292.57, October 1784.

most of his crews were local, as many boatmen were involved in the waterway trade. In 1783 six of his seagoing ships were loaded with limestone, burned lime, and timber, destined for Bakergonj, near the Bay of Bengal. His agent sold these products, and bought 15,000 bags of rice to sell in Madras.<sup>34</sup>

Colonel Bruce was the Inspector General of Police in India in 1864, and he noted: 'Now it is known to the Government of Bengal that during the summer months, the Sylhet District is a perfect flood, and even in the cold season the principal means of moving about are boats. The population generally are of aquatic habits, and almost everyone understands more or less the management of boats.'<sup>35</sup> When he submitted a detailed plan for Sylhet, he therefore argued for a river police, because he identified 'aquatic habits' as a characteristic of Sylheti people. A few years later, in 1876–77, William Hunter mentioned the external trade of Sylhet that passed in country boats along the Surma and Barak rivers towards the coast of Bengal.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1870s, total exports from Sylhet were valued at £597,500, of which tea now made up the most valuable portion, at £285,678, while limestone was worth £79,032. At that time, before the advent of railways, some of these goods were brought from beyond Sylhet's boundaries, and the great bulk of the export traffic was carried in 'native boats'.<sup>37</sup> Sylhet enjoyed water communications with Calcutta and the rest of Bengal that were cheap and easy, and a shortcut waterway from Assam to Bengal ran through the heart of the area. That was what made Sylhet geographically and commercially so important in the 1870s, when the British annexed the region to Assam. Hunter, Allen, and Friel all wrote that, over the centuries, Sylheti merchants and boatmen had been carrying goods between Assam and Bengal and far beyond.<sup>38</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, however, the traditional river trade in country boats declined, owing to the introduction of new means of transport. An overseas market had emerged for tea, by then the major product of Sylhet and Assam, which was exported on river steamers. Jute (grown in eastern Bengal, including Sylhet) was another export product which was carried by steamers. This was followed by the construction of railway lines into the interior. The Assam Bengal Railway was launched in 1891, with the objective of developing communications in the eastern region of British India, ensuring an easy outlet for export products through the newly created port of Chittagong.<sup>39</sup>

Hundreds of Sylheti boatmen thus found themselves out of a job. They moved from river to sea, looking for employment in seagoing ships at the Kidderpore dock in Calcutta.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Sylhet gradually became the main supplier of seamen in Calcutta. The Calcutta-based

34 Sylhet District Records, 292.57, 29 March 1792.

35 H. Bruce, *Report on the police of the province of Assam and the districts of Sylhet, Cachar, Mymensingh, Cossysh and Jynteah Hills*, Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1864, p. 65.

36 W. W. Hunter, *A statistical account of Assam, vol. 2: Sylhet*, London: Trubner & Company, 1879, p. 306.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

38 *Ibid.*; B. C. Allen, *Assam district gazetteers: Sylhet*, vol. 2, Calcutta: Government of Assam, 1905; R. Friel, *Assam district gazetteers: Sylhet*, supplement vol. 2, Shillong: Government of Assam, 1915.

39 Hena Mukherjee, 'Assam Bengal Railway', in Sirajul Islam, ed., *Banglapedia*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2012, pp. 442–3; Sarah Hilaly, *The railways in Assam 1885–1947*, Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishers, 2007, pp. 134, 210–12.

40 Yousuf Choudhury, *Routes and tales*, pp. 29–31.

celebrity writer Shankar argues that the people of Sylhet were the pioneers among Bengalis for the ‘conquest of the sea’. By nature, he asserted, they were ‘brave’, and they had the courage to sail to almost every port of the world. From the Kidderpore dock they created history, participating in global trade.<sup>41</sup>

## Sylheti land tenure and emigration

Many Sylheti seamen were not only part-time boatmen by origin but also ‘middle peasants’, who were negatively affected by the closing of the land frontier. For centuries Sylhet had been a land of internal migrants, as its agrarian frontier expanded into jungle land to the east. However, this avenue of mobility closed from the late nineteenth century, when large quantities of uncultivated land were turned into tea plantations.<sup>42</sup>

‘Wild’ or ‘indigenous’ tea was discovered in Sylhet in January 1856, feeding enthusiasm at the local level, as Europeans planters and officials envisaged an extension of Assam’s tea frontier. In his report to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, the Magistrate of Sylhet, T. P. Larkins, mentioned that the tea plant grew in great abundance in the Chandkhanee Hills. He sent specimens to the Agricultural Society of India at Calcutta, for analysis and suggested, ‘In consequence of the importance of this discovery, I should be obliged by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal sanctioning the payment of the reward of Rupees 50 to the lucky discoverer, Mohammad Warish.’<sup>43</sup>

For British planters, the expansion of tea cultivation was presented as a matter of national interest. In the early 1880s, George Braker, one of the tea planters, suggested that they were useful for maintaining ‘English interests’ in India. He also commended the planters for populating and making productive a ‘jungle’ which otherwise would have been little better than a ‘wilderness’.<sup>44</sup> In south Sylhet, isolated groups of low hills were initially described on official maps as ‘impenetrable jungle’, but they rapidly became very valuable for tea cultivation. Colonel R. G. Woodthorpe, in charge of a survey team, found that the air was beautiful, soft, and balmy. He noted that the planters had opened up the jungle, and had made good roads in several places.<sup>45</sup>

The expansion of tea cultivation brought significant changes in land use and land ownership in Sylhet, owing to the rise of private ownership in wastelands and virgin forest, which had previously been held as common land. In Assam, Robert Bruce had pioneered the transformation of the ‘tea forest’ into ‘tea gardens’, and in Sylhet the word ‘garden’ seems to have been equivalent to the vernacular term *bagan*.<sup>46</sup> To local people, historically, the word

41 Shankar (real name Mani Shankar Mukherjee), *Banga basundhara (Bengal and the world)*, Calcutta: De’s Publication, 1999, pp. 294–5.

42 Ashfaq Hossain, ‘Historical globalization and its effects: a study of Sylhet and its people, 1874–1971’, PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2009, pp. 32–42.

43 British Library, London, India Office Records (henceforth IOR), MF 1/891, ‘Notes from the letter of T.P. Larkins, Magistrate, Fort William Fouzdari Court, Zillah Sylhet to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal’, 19 February 1856, p. 48.

44 George Braker, *Tea planter’s life in Assam*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1884, pp. 231–2.

45 T. Shaw, and A. B. Smart, *A brief history of surveys of the Sylhet District*, Shillong: Government of Assam, 1917; Charles E. D. Black, *A memoir on the Indian surveys, 1875–1890*, London: Secretary of State for India in Council, 1891, pp. 77–8.

46 Hossain, ‘Historical globalization’, p. 34.

*bagan* had the connotation of personal proprietary rights, suitable for homesteads. Therefore, the new *cha bagan* (tea gardens) that planters operated were viewed as their exclusive private property in the jungle and hills of Sylhet. In this way, once-common lands came under the control of tea capitalists. When jungles and wastelands were taken for tea production, the expansion of the peasant frontier into common lands suddenly stopped, and Sylhetis faced a new challenge. By the early twentieth century hardly any land was left for reclamation.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, there was a sharp increase in population. Between 1872 and 1941, the Muslim population in Sylhet rose by 1,037,986, while the increase in the Hindu population was 290,280.<sup>48</sup> Such rapid demographic expansion intensified the pressure on agrarian social structures.

In rural Sylhet, small landowners and independent peasants occupied lands that were cultivated with the help of family members, and the gradual demise of these holdings, through subdivision, contributed to the process of Sylhetis leaving home to work overseas. Land was subdivided between brothers and cousins, and eventually there was not enough left to divide. Perhaps in no other district of Bengal and Assam was the subdivision of landed property carried out to a greater extent.<sup>49</sup> The growth of population exacerbated shortages of land, leading young and venturesome individuals into the hot engine rooms of merchant ships, in the hope of improving their economic conditions.

That said, many seafarers were far from being impoverished peasants. Mushtaq Qureshi stated: 'The Sylheti sailors were not poor peasants. I mean what was in Bengal; it was not the same in Sylhet. Sylheti seamen were [*sic*] not come from very lower strata of the society. They had basic education – education I don't mean reading or writing English – they were better knowledgeable persons.'<sup>50</sup> Archival and oral evidence shows that some seamen came from wealthier peasant groups, who were independent landowners. In parallel with many other migrant societies, affluent peasants, living in big families to improve their prospects, liked to have additional income, so they sent 'spare' young men to work in merchant ships.<sup>51</sup> The number of *lakhirajdar*, who held rent-free grants on religious grounds, was large in Sylhet. The census report of 1871–72 and a study carried out in 1910 also showed that there were many prosperous landed proprietors in Sylhet, locally called *talukdar*, who owned, occupied, and cultivated hereditary lands, without having either a superior landlord above them or a sub-holder of any sort beneath them, and it appears that their number was greater in Sylhet than in any other district of Bengal.<sup>52</sup>

A few Sylhetis were driven to sea by family indebtedness, although they were educated men, who were called 'master' in their own community. For example, Ayub Ali Master was an outstanding student of the then Assam province, who won a talent-pool scholarship in 1913. But he had to leave school to become a seaman at the age of twenty, because his

47 Allen, *Sylhet*, p. 7.

48 Hossain, 'Historical globalization', pp. 20–1.

49 Hunter, *Sylhet*, pp. 289–90.

50 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi, West London, 8 December 2006.

51 Yousuf Choudhury, *Routes and tales*, p. 59.

52 H. Beverly, *Report on the census of Bengal, 1872*, Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1872, pp. cxliv–cxiv; Achyut Choudhury, *Sreebatter itibritta*, p. 51.

father's boat business failed. The whole family was sunk into debt by high interest rates charged by a moneylender. A debt of 600 rupees quickly turned into 3,000 rupees, with interest payments, and this was higher than the family's total assets.<sup>53</sup> However, the first district gazetteer showed that people were generally solvent in 1901 in Sylhet, as compared to other parts of Bengal, so that debt was not likely to have been a major factor in overall migration.<sup>54</sup>

Sylhetis moved not just as seamen onto the oceans, but also as agrarian and clerical entrepreneurs within South Asia, particularly to frontier zones, such as Assam and Darjeeling, which were then coming under British colonial rule. Whereas the middle peasants who became seamen were mostly Muslims, clerks were generally upper-caste Hindus. In the context of the newly created Assam province, both upper-class Hindu *babus* and the Muslim *ashraf* elite, who claimed descent from Middle Eastern immigrants, moved to clerical jobs, as more opportunities opened up for indigenous elites. In the first half of the twentieth century, many Muslim *ashraf* of Sylhet took part in law-making in the Provincial Assembly of Assam, and even acted as 'native' tea planters.<sup>55</sup>

Among those who chose the sea, there was considerable cross-class cooperation. On many occasions, Sylhetis of different social origins helped each other to travel to Calcutta, and to make all the arrangements and agreements needed to become seamen. Higher social groups became intermediaries, buying houses at Kidderpore in Calcutta, and renting them to fellow Sylhetis. Some of them also ran small businesses there. Thus, in 1897–98, Ayan Ullah built a large house in Calcutta and turned it into a *bari*, or boarding house, for seamen and prospective seamen. This makeshift *bari* accommodated many persons, and he soon became one of the central figures who acted for fellow Sylhetis, securing them jobs on merchant ships.<sup>56</sup>

'Chain migration' then sustained the movement of people out of Sylhet. As Sylhetis found jobs, other people from their area followed them. Moreover, Sylhetis knew that Calcutta was the place to obtain information relating to such jobs, and Calcutta was not far away. By the late nineteenth century, pioneer seamen in Calcutta had already developed recruitment networks.<sup>57</sup> Sylheti foremen gave their countrymen jobs on ships already filled with Sylheti seamen, and these networks sent Sylhetis all over the world.

As migrants returned to their villages, their stories spurred more men to follow in their footsteps. As Mushtaq Qureshi pointed out: 'In my childhood in the 1930s, I have seen these seafaring people were respected and if any one progressed in his job everybody called him as Serang, Master, or Vandery, and in his locality he was hailed as a respected person.'<sup>58</sup> People accorded them special respect on the grounds that 'this man has travelled [to] England and America and he is a knowledgeable person', and their status in village society was correspondingly high. Seamen returned home with new clothes, money and exotic tales, which created excitement among youngsters and stirred village imagination. Every little

53 Nurul Islam, *Probashir kotha (Tales of immigrants)*, Sylhet: Probashi Publication, 1989, p. 523.

54 Allen, *Sylhet*, p. 167.

55 Ashafque Hossain, 'The making and unmaking of Assam–Bengal borders and the Sylhet Referendum', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47, 1, 2013, pp. 250–87.

56 Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire*, p. 13.

57 THLA, P/ADM/2/1, Audio cassette tape interview with Nawab Ali by Caroline Adams in the 1980s.

58 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi.

boy wanted to be like 'grandfather, father or uncle' and wished to travel across the seas to see the world.<sup>59</sup>

## Cultural traditions of mobility in Sylhet

Richard Eaton has investigated how religious and economic mobility, sponsored by Muslim political authorities, had a long-standing impact in the rural areas of East Bengal. From Sylhet to Chittagong, Muslim sultans expanded their authority among dependent social groups by issuing religious grants in the forested hinterland. The social group locally known as *pirs*, or Muslim 'saints', oversaw the cleaning of jungle lands and the construction of shrines, which in turn became centres of Muslim culture along the agrarian frontier. According to Eaton, there were 'three kinds of frontier – the economic frontier separating field and forest, the political frontier separating Mughal from non-Mughal administration, and the religious frontier separating Islam and non-Islam – fused into one'. As Sufi holy men and their disciples cleared the jungles of Sylhet, agriculture came to be closely linked to the spread of Islam.<sup>60</sup>

Sylheti accounts thus stress a traditional culture of geographical mobility, derived from a process of Islamization that involved migrants from afar. Ibn Battuta mentioned that he met Shah Jalal, a great Sufi mystic 'saint', in Sylhet in the fourteenth century. Shah Jalal came from Yemen, and it was believed that many other Muslim holy men did so as well.<sup>61</sup> Large numbers of them settled in Sylhet, and preached Islam in this frontier region of Bengal. Shah Jalal is still venerated by Bangladeshis, irrespective of creed and caste, and his Arab followers married local women and settled in the area.<sup>62</sup> The studies of Rafiuddin Ahmed have shown how this kind of 'popular Islam' played a defining role in the rural society of late nineteenth-century Bengal.<sup>63</sup>

Many Sylhetis, whether converted from Hinduism or claiming direct descent from such 'saints', maintained that they had inherited their tendency to migrate from Muslim pioneers. One of the leading seamen of Sylhet claimed: 'I come from (a place) called *Patli-Qureshibari*. Why it is *Qureshibari* is because I am a direct descendant of Shahkamal, one of the saints who went to Bangladesh or Sylhet with Shahjalal ... Shahkamal is the descendants of Abubakar, the first Caliph Abubakar.'<sup>64</sup> Oral testimony suggests that linking family history with Shah Jalal and his followers is quite common in Sylhet. This particular notion has captured the imagination of the Muslim masses of Sylhet, and these beliefs have constantly

59 Interviews with Nurul Islam, 14 October 2006 and 2 January 2007, Essex, UK; Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi; THLA, P/ADM/2/3/4/5/6, Audio cassette tapes of interviews with Nawab Ali, Taslim Ali, Afruz Miah, Zohor Ali, Hazi Kona Miah, and Attaur Ullah by Caroline Adams in the 1980s.

60 Richard M. Eaton, *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204–1760*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 212–13.

61 Syed Murtuza Ali, *Hazrat Shah Jalal o Sylhetter itihās (Shah Jalal and the history of Sylhet)*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1965, pp. 9–11.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906: a quest for identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Understanding Bengali Muslims: interpretive essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

64 THLA, P/ADM/2/11–13, Audio cassette tape interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi by Caroline Adams in the 1980s.

been reflected through devotional songs celebrating Shah Jalal, which are still sung both in Sylhet and in the music stores of Brick Lane, London.<sup>65</sup>

The London-based poet Shamim Azad even metaphorically suggests that Sylheti seafarers had a special ‘migratory gene’, which drove them across rivers and seas.<sup>66</sup> Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi’s narrative similarly stresses this cultural aspect of Sylheti mobility. He was born in 1915, and after his Matriculation (equivalent to GCSE) he went to London as a seaman. He described the character of the Sylheti people in the following language:

The people of Sylhet are very daredevil types, you may say wandering race, and they like to see the world, like to go all over, very inquisitive type. You will find all over the world, in every nook and corner, not only England, but even Russia, America, Canada, Australia, everywhere you will find Sylhetis. And it is the seafaring men, they enter a port, they settle, they bring others after them, here in this country [United Kingdom] ...<sup>67</sup>

## Sylhetis as merchant seamen

The evidence indicates that some Bengali seamen were already familiar with Britain and America by the late eighteenth century, when British ships employed many ‘native’ crewmen.<sup>68</sup> In 1784, about a dozen Bengali ‘lascars’ were stranded in New Haven, Pennsylvania. Their American employer sold his ship and laid off the vessel’s Bengali crew, without making any arrangement for their return passage. Being financially unable to pay their way, and not being inclined to settle in America, the stranded seamen implored local people to come forward to arrange their passage. Benjamin Franklin, the philosopher, statesman, and president of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, organized a fundraising drive for their repatriation, ‘viewing it as a matter of some importance that these people should not be permitted to carry home with them any well-founded prejudice against either the justice or humanity of the United States’.<sup>69</sup>

While steamer captains were thus not the first to hire Indian sailors, the rise of steam shipping greatly expanded this type of employment. British dominance in Indian Ocean shipping was clear, as transnational trade grew twenty-five times between 1850 and 1910.<sup>70</sup> The use of larger vessels and steam power greatly increased the volume of trade. The British parliament passed laws that aimed to provide cheap Asian labour for British ships. Asian seamen were popularly known as ‘lascars’, which defined both a race and a specific type of labour contract.<sup>71</sup>

65 I have heard these songs from my boyhood in Sylhet, and also in Brick Lane during my visits between 2007 and 2009.

66 Interview with Shamim Azad, Gants Hill, Essex, 6 April 2008.

67 Caroline Adams’ interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi.

68 Lindsay, ‘Anecdotes’, pp. 41–9.

69 ‘Proceedings of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania’, 3 November 1785, in *Colonial records of Pennsylvania*, vol. 14, Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1853, p. 569.

70 Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 192–3.

71 Captain W. H. Wood, *The blight of insubordination: the Lascar Question and rights and wrongs of the British shipmaster, including the Mercantile Marine Committee Report*, London, Spottiswoode & Co., 1903, pp. 49–50. Norma Myers, ‘The black poor of London: initiatives of Eastern seamen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, in Diane Frost, ed., *Ethnic labour and British imperial trade: a history of ethnic seafarers*, London: Frank Cass & Co., 1995, pp. 9–11.

Janet J. Ewald has explored the case of Yemeni seamen, and suggests a basis for comparing global maritime trades and cultures. Her work clearly shows that shortages of maritime labour encouraged European capitalists to recruit 'lascars' from Asia.<sup>72</sup> Colonial seamen were hired for hard jobs, notably working below decks as firemen. Statistics exist from 1891, when 24,000 of the seamen in British vessels were not British.<sup>73</sup> Numbers of South Asian seamen rose steadily in the early twentieth century, reaching 52,000 on the eve of the First World War.<sup>74</sup>

Traditions of mobility among Sylhetis went hand in hand with aquatic skills. In 1881, the Census Commissioner wrote, 'the Mahomedan youth of eastern Bengal delta still furnish the Bay of Bengal with the boatmen and sailors, as they did when Mughals had a dockyard and a naval arsenal in Dacca'. He further noted that the seafaring people of the eastern Bengal delta went to Calcutta.<sup>75</sup> In the following decades, the people of the other districts of eastern Bengal dropped out, but Sylhetis continued to work as seamen in the merchant marine. They were preferred because they did not drink alcohol, since they were Muslims, and because they were said to be good at working in the hot engine rooms of ships.<sup>76</sup> As one of the seamen who went to Calcutta in the early twentieth century stated: 'Bengali people worked very hard on the ships – all Bengali people, all from Sylhet. The British liked them because they worked hard. People from other districts did not want this kind of job.'<sup>77</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, as demand grew for 'lascars' to work in hot coal-fired steamers, Sylhetis worked on British ships leaving from Calcutta in greater numbers. Sylhetis, searching for a new source of income, were unfamiliar with stoking coal-fired boilers, but they were prepared to learn. As Mushtaq Qureshi put it:

It was most difficult job on earth. To become a fireman in a steamship was the worst thing in the world. A ship's furnace was so big and is unbelievable to think and they have to shovel the coal all the time in the open boiler or furnace. There was half an hour shift – half an hour on and half an hour off. It was so hot that many sailors run out and used to jump in the sea.<sup>78</sup>

Sylhetis took up this challenge and gained a virtual monopoly as engine-room crew on steamships sailing out of Calcutta, a position that they retained until coal-fired ships were finally phased out of service at the end of the Second World War.<sup>79</sup> To some extent, they were

72 Janet J. Ewald, 'Crossers of the sea: slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914', *American Historical Review*, 105, 1, 2000, pp. 76–7.

73 Conrad Dixon, 'Lascars: the forgotten seamen', in R. Ommer and G. Panting, eds., *Working men who got wet: proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Atlantic Shipping Project, July 24–July 26 1980*, Saint John: Newfoundland Memorial University Press, 1980, p. 281.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

75 *Census of India, Bengal, 1881*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Government of Bengal, p. 78.

76 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi; Caroline Adams' interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi.

77 THLA, P/ADM, Audio cassette tape interviews with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi and Attah Ullah by Caroline Adams in the 1980s.

78 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi.

79 Information and Broadcasting Department, India, *Our merchant seamen: modern India series*, vol. 3, New Delhi: Government of India, 1947, p. 28; Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire*, pp. 107–8.

even considered better than European seamen. For instance, G. E. Milton, in a book about the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) shipping company in 1913, expressed a view about Asian seamen that was probably held by many people at that time. He argued that the little-known ‘lascars’ were better than Europeans, provided that they were not kept long aboard. According to him, ‘this is due to the amount of caloric absorbed into their systems under their tropical sun’.<sup>80</sup>

## Sylheti seamen in two world wars

During the world wars of the twentieth century, British sailors joined the Royal Navy in large numbers, allowing more ‘lascars’ to find their way onto European merchant ships.<sup>81</sup> The narratives of Ayub Ali Master, Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi, Israel Miah, and others, recorded in Caroline Adams’ oral history project, together with our study of later generations, confirm this story.

Information on Sylheti seamen at war is scattered, and this is particularly true of their role in the First World War. The merchant navy’s duty was to supply the Royal Navy, to transport troops and supplies to battle fronts, to maintain ordinary imports and exports, to supply raw materials for the factories, and to supply food for home and abroad. Losses of vessels were high from the outset, peaking in 1917, when Germany announced the adoption of ‘unrestricted submarine warfare’. By the end of the war, 3,305 merchant ships had been lost, together with some 17,000 lives.

Pre-war restrictions on Asian seamen’s employment were put aside when war was declared in 1914, and many were recruited into the merchant navy. The mission worker George Mitchell commented: ‘The war has widened the shipping doors for the admission of the “East and West” into the service of the Mercantile Marine, and copper-coloured Lascars and the yellow faced Chinaman have enhanced their reputation among the seafaring fraternity.’<sup>82</sup> During the conflict, over one thousand Sylhetis came to Britain, together with fellow seamen from the subcontinent, and some unsurprisingly lost their lives. Mushtaq Qureshi relates that going out to sea was a risky job at this time.<sup>83</sup>

In the Second World War, British losses were again considerable, reaching a peak in 1942, as German submarines attempted to impose a blockade on Britain. In all, 4,786 merchant ships were lost, with a total of some 32,000 lives.<sup>84</sup> The Clan Line, the B. B. Line, and the P&O shipping company were prominent in recruiting engine-room crew from Sylhet.<sup>85</sup> Many Sylheti veterans narrated their vivid experiences during the war to Caroline Adams,

80 G. E. Milton, *Peeps at great steamship lines: the Peninsular and Oriental*, London: Adams and Charles Black, 1913, p. 58.

81 C. B. A. Behrens, *History of the Second World War: merchant shipping and the demands of war*, London: HMSO, 1956; Islam, *Probashir kotha*, pp. 621–2.

82 Howard Bloch, ‘From over the seas: foreign sailors ashore in the Royal Docks’, *Local Studies*, Stratford Library, London, n.d., p. 1.

83 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi.

84 Commonwealth War Graves Commission, ‘Records of the Tower Hill Memorial’, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/> (consulted 3 July 2014).

85 Caroline Adams’ interview with Nawab Ali; Yousuf Choudhury, *Routes and tales*, p. 58.

including those who obtained a 'second life' because of an 'absolute miracle'. Knowing the risks of perishing through attacks by German U-boats, some of them still returned to their old profession, leaving safe job in restaurants in Britain. Israel Miah, telling of his wartime experience, stated:

That time it was really war. But I went to the ship ... I was on that one for 4 or 5 months then I came back. It was very hard work. We went to Australia. Next voyage I went again, this same ship, everybody else come out but I stayed there ... Twice we came to London, then the whole crew wanted to come out, because some trouble with the engineer, but I said, No, I am going to stay. All of you can go, but I am going to stay ... this is wartime.<sup>86</sup>

Each of the veterans had unique experiences. To them the Second World War remained part of their consciousness, and it had a particular meaning. I have gathered other stories of Sylheti seamen's involvement in the Second World War, with interviewees highlighting the participation of their relatives in the war.

As the war developed, bonds between Sylheti seamen became tighter: fathers and sons, brothers, uncles and nephews, relatives and neighbours, worked together side by side on ships. Good working relationships and morale existed among these crews.<sup>87</sup> This could save lives, but too much closeness sometimes had disastrous consequences as well: Mohammed Ali and his uncle were both on the same sinking ship. After the bombing, while other people were running for the lifeboats and safety, the two stayed behind looking for each other. The ship sank. Both uncle and nephew went down with it. Kushid Ali and his brother were in another ship, which was burning, when the crew evacuated the ship and saved themselves in lifeboats. Kushid Ali was in one of these lifeboats, but, looking around and not seeing his brother, he jumped into the sea and started swimming towards the sinking ship. There were many stories like these, which were heard in Sylhet.<sup>88</sup>

When a ship was hit, every member of the crew faced danger wherever they were working, but the engine room crews were in the worst position, because they were down below, where smoke, fire, or incoming water might prevent escape. Often the engine-room door automatically shut. Admiral Lord Mountevans, writing after the war, described the dangers:

Those of us who have escorted convoys in either of the Great Wars can never forget the days and especially the nights spent in company with those slow-moving squadron of iron tramps – the wisps of smoke from their funnels, the phosphorescent wakes, the metallic clang of iron doors at the end of the night watches which told us that the Merchant Service firemen were coming up after four hours in the heated engine rooms, or boiler rooms, where they had run the gauntlet of torpedo or mine for perhaps half the years of the war. I remember so often thinking that those in the engine rooms, if they were torpedoed, would probably be drowned before they reached the engine room steps.<sup>89</sup>

86 THLA, P/ADAM/1/1, Caroline Adams, 'Navy men: lives of early Bangladeshi settlers in Britain', undated typescript.

87 Caroline Adams' interview with Nawab Ali; Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire*, pp. 56–67.

88 Interviews with Nurul Islam; Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi.

89 A. B. Campbell, *Salute the red duster*, London: Christopher Johnson, 1952, Forward.

Even though some survived the main attack, they had hardly any chance to climb on a lifeboat. They swam for a few hours, or even days. If not found by a rescue party, they drowned or were eaten by sharks. Some made it to the lifeboats, but then died for lack of food.<sup>90</sup>

While the spotlight was on the Royal Navy, Coastal Command, and the RAF, merchant seamen also made significant sacrifices in both world wars. The names inscribed on the Tower Hill Memorial, in London, indicate that merchant seamen were the single largest group of casualties in terms of numbers, and the names of many war heroes of Sylhet were inscribed here. The memorial commemorates men and women of the merchant navy and fishing fleets who died in both wars and who have no known grave.<sup>91</sup> These low-profile seamen came to be known as the 'Fourth Service'. Among the eleven dead on the ship *Thomas Walton*, seven were from Sylhet. Nurul Islam's two maternal uncles went to Calcutta to become seamen and one of them was on that ship. His name was Ujoman M. (Muslim Ujoman) and he died at sea.<sup>92</sup> Many were awarded medals for their sacrifice, even at a much later date. For example, Somir Ullah was awarded four medals in recognition of his service in the merchant marine.<sup>93</sup> From available data, it has been estimated that more than 6,600 Indian seamen lost their lives in discharging their duty, and 1,022 were wounded, many of them becoming disabled. In addition, 1,217 were taken as prisoners of war.<sup>94</sup>

## Sylhetis as settlers in foreign lands

Service on board Western ships imperceptibly led to settlement abroad, perhaps initially in Southeast Asia. By the 1930s, Singapore, an important port city and British naval base in Southeast Asia, already had a 3,000 strong community of Sylheti seamen. Leaving Calcutta, they went to sea on British merchant vessels, and they sought employment ashore between engagements.<sup>95</sup>

In Britain, prior to the twentieth century, Sylheti seamen had been merely sojourners for short periods in port cities, but in the early twentieth century some of them began to stay. In the docks of east London they deserted or 'jumped ship', and searched for new livelihoods in Britain.<sup>96</sup> Howard Bloch wrote about East End Jews, and did pioneering work on the history of black and Asian workers in east London. He pointed out that 'Asian sailors ... had been employed on foreign ships for several centuries', and that 'only a few years ago' sailors from all over the world came to British docks, and gave Victoria Dock Road's public houses, cafés, shops, and lodging houses much of its cosmopolitan character.<sup>97</sup>

90 M. Watkins-Thomas, 'Our Asian crews', in *About ourselves*, London: P&O, 1955; Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi; Interviews with Nurul Islam; Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire*, pp. 56–7.

91 Tower Hill Memorial, Trinity Square, London (seen on 16 March 2007).

92 Interviews with Nurul Islam.

93 Family papers of Somir Ullah, obtained from Mr Salikur Rahman, son of Somir Ullah, London, 15 March 2007, letter from David Jones, Medal Section, Marine Safety Agency (MSA), Cardiff, to Mr Salikur Rahman, 5 September 1997.

94 Information and Broadcasting Department, *Our merchant seamen*, p. 8.

95 The National Archives, UK, PRO CO 273/639/9, Colonial Office, Abdul Majid's petition to the Board of Trade, 2 September 1938.

96 IOR, L/PJ/12/630, 'All India Seamen's Federation in United Kingdom', 4 December 1939, pp. 13–16.

97 Bloch, 'From over the seas'; Howard Bloch, *Canning Town voices*, London: Tempus, 1997.

When the First World War ended, a small number of Sylheti seamen who had survived the war married Irish, Scottish, or English women and lived in different dockside towns or cities such as Glasgow, Cardiff, Liverpool, or London. Over time, more Sylheti seamen married British women and settled in Britain. Remembering the 1940s, Fazol Karim states: 'Lala Miah was married to a white wife and because of that he was not liked by his cousins ... Later I met an English girl and fell in love with her. The episode changed me altogether. Soon I broke away from my cousins and married the girl and came to settle in Birmingham.'<sup>98</sup>

Brojendra Nanryan Chowdhury even mentioned that some Sylhetis returned home with their 'White Mem' wives, who adopted the village lifestyle in a world that they found strange.<sup>99</sup> Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi was not only invited to the marriage of Mashuk Ali and his English fiancée but he was also an intimate friend to this couple. After the war the couple established a tailoring shop in London and from their clothing business they made good money. They were able to give an English education to two boys, and later sent them to South Asia for a Bengali education.<sup>100</sup>

Those who settled in Britain often ran restaurants, which were frequented by workers and seamen. In turn, these contacts allowed more Sylhetis to stay. Other Sylhetis found jobs in Jewish-owned clothing enterprises in east London. The centre of this network was Brick Lane.<sup>101</sup> Already with a foothold in 1920s, Toffosil Ali, Ayub Ali Master, and Surat Ali led the Sylheti network in Britain. Their numbers were augmented by desertions, and they were found working in 'Indian' cafés and boarding houses. In July 1930, an officer of the British India Steam Navigation Company observed that the deserters from its ships were 'all connected with the preparation of food'.<sup>102</sup> Some Sylhetis died inside their restaurants in Britain, victims of German flying bombs in the Second World War.<sup>103</sup>

It was only in the late 1930s that the restaurant business took off, and one good example of this trend was Ayub Ali Master. After a spell in America, he finally settled in England in the 1930s, opening a restaurant in east London. His Shah Jalal Restaurant, at 76 Commercial Street, was in the heart of the East End, and it served as a hub of the Indian community there. Ayub Ali Master took care of seamen who had 'jumped ship' by giving them free food and shelter, and he helped them to register at India House, or at a police station. When they got jobs, many would go on to rent rooms in his house, popularly known as 'Number Thirteen' at Sandays Row. Early Sylheti migrants would continue to receive support from him in the form of letter writing and help with sending remittances to Sylhet.<sup>104</sup>

Caroline Adams traced the movements of these people across Britain, as they increasingly sought work in the industrial sectors of the Midlands and the north of England. As she put it: 'The Bangladeshi community in Britain began to take root on the territory marked out by the

98 Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the empire*, p. 25.

99 Chowdhury, *Smriti and Pratiti*, p. 207.

100 Caroline Adams' interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi.

101 Interviews with Nurul Islam.

102 IOR, L/E/9/962, Letter of the British India Steam Navigation Company, 30 July 1930.

103 Nurul Islam, *Sojourners to settlers: the tales of immigrants*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2013, p. 199.

104 Caroline Adams' interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi; Islam, *Sojourners to settlers*, p. 197.

first few casual pioneers who has found the way “across seven seas and thirteen rivers” from Sylhet to Aldgate. ... The Empire had finally come home.<sup>105</sup>

Sylheti seamen in England were in contact with other Indians, including those from an elite background. For example, a highly educated man such as Gojnar Ali Khan (1872–1959) met with Sylheti seamen on many occasions during his stay in Cambridge. He was the fourth Muslim officer to be accepted into the Indian Civil Service, and was honoured with the award of an OBE (Officer of the most excellent order of the British Empire) and a CIE (Companion of the Indian Empire).<sup>106</sup>

While Britain was the main focus of Sylheti migrants, others, also at first employed in ships as ‘lascars’, settled elsewhere. As noted above, Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi declared that his countrymen were to be found in England, Canada, Australia, Russia, and elsewhere.<sup>107</sup> America was probably the most significant destination after the United Kingdom. In the 1940s, the anthropologist Marian Smith met Sylhetis in the USA, and interviewed one Abdul Rahman of Sylhet, who was living and working in New York City.<sup>108</sup> Aftab Ali, perhaps the most prominent of the men to settle in America, was born in a big landowner’s family in a village in Sylhet in 1907. His father and grandfather were both boat merchants. At the age of eighteen, when he was studying in class ten, Aftab Ali ran away from Sylhet. He went first to Calcutta and from there to America as a seaman.<sup>109</sup>

Many Sylhetis came to hold jobs in American automobile factories, but others found different employment. In the 1920s, Kamruzzaman of Moulvibazar was an astrologer who opened a ‘Fortune Telling Centre’ at the amusement park of Detroit. He operated this business with a signboard, ‘Mystic man from mystic land who tells the untold and sees the unseen’. Most of his customers were young ladies.<sup>110</sup> Samad Chowdhury was a high school teacher in Sylhet before he went to sea. He went to America as a seaman, and began to work there. Along with Ayub Ali Master, he met with the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in the United States in 1920s. Samad recited a poem, and a delighted Tagore wished them success.<sup>111</sup>

## Sylheti organizations and activism

Surveillance agencies and the police closely monitored the activities of Indian seamen in Britain, and one report indicates that some of their activities were essentially non-political and recreational in nature, with organizations providing purely social amenities. For instance, Sylheti seamen in the East End changed the name of the Indian Seamen’s Union to that of the Indian Seamen’s Welfare League, because they did not want to appear to engage in trade union or political activities. This was partly because they desired recognition from ship-owners, and partly to avoid unwelcome attention from the police. Monia Meah, alias

105 Adams, *Across the seven seas*, p. 66.

106 Hossain, ‘Historical globalization’, p. 142.

107 Caroline Adams’ interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi.

108 Marian Smith, ‘Village notes from Bengal’, *American Anthropologist*, 48, 4, 1946, pp. 581–2.

109 Hossain, ‘Historical globalization’, p. 149.

110 Islam, *Probashir kotha*, p. 52.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 547.

Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi, was President of the league, and Ayub Ali Master was Secretary.<sup>112</sup> New Scotland Yard officers noted that 'this new organization is opposed to the India League setting up a branch office in East London and its intrusion into the affairs of Indian Seamen'.<sup>113</sup> The India League was an expatriate South Asian political organization, established in 1922.<sup>114</sup>

Oral evidence further claims that the Indian Seamen's Welfare League was the first 'Sylheti people's platform' in the United Kingdom. The league had its office in Christian Street, and its objective was to look after the economic, social, and cultural interests of Indian seamen. It also communicated with their relatives in India, in the event of any misfortune befalling them.<sup>115</sup> The following letter from Ayub Ali Master to the Clan Line, in 1943, is an indication of his organization's attempt to build bridges between 'lascars' and their employers in times of war. It stated:

In order to remove the long-felt want of the Indian seamen in London to have a centre of friendly meeting recreation of their own, a Club has been recently organized under the name of the 'Indian Seamen's Welfare League'. The aim and object of this Club is purely [to provide] social amenities for the Indian seamen and their friends. I am directed to invite you to a memorial meeting in honour of the Indian seamen who have lost their lives in the course of their duties in this war ... Knowing your interest in the welfare of the Indian seamen, the Welfare League will highly appreciate your presence at such a meeting and remain grateful for your encouragement and support.<sup>116</sup>

In terms of trade union activities, ethnic differences between migrants from British India at times weakened organizations. Thus, the Indian Workers' Union in the Midlands and the north of England was dominated by Punjabis, from both Muslim and Sikh communities, originating in the north-western part of British India. A secret report reveals: 'It tends to make stability and cohesion among the large Punjabi element in the Midlands and Industrial North, but [it] also tends to exclude the Bengali who has nothing to common with the Punjabi and [is] usually despised by him.'<sup>117</sup>

Aftab Ali, whose migration to the United States was noted above, was a major Sylheti trade unionist, across three continents. After gaining syndicalist training in the US, he helped to strengthen the Calcutta-based Indian Seamen's Union. Having himself worked as a sailor in the 1920s, with valuable first-hand experiences of the inadequate working conditions of 'lascars', Aftab Ali was motivated to strive tirelessly to achieve better working conditions for South Asian seamen. In the 1920s he became General Secretary of the Indian Seamen's Union. In order to make Indian seamen's campaign more effective, in the 1930s he united various unions under the banner of the All India Seamen's Federation, of which he

112 IOR, P/J/12/630, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report No. 248, 7 July 1943, p. 138.

113 *Ibid.*

114 IOR, L/PJ/12/448, 'V. K. Menon and India League', 1 May 1939.

115 IOR, L/PJ/12/630, p. 140.

116 IOR, L/PJ/12/630, Letter from Ayub Ali on behalf of the Indian Seamen Welfare League to Clan Line, 22 June 1943, p. 143.

117 IOR, L/PJ/12/645, p. 64.

became president.<sup>118</sup> He was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1937, and for long he remained a close ally of two premiers of undivided Bengal, Fazlul Haque and Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy. Aftab Ali became vice-president of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), but broke away from this body in 1941.<sup>119</sup>

Answering a question on seamen's leadership, most of Caroline Adams' interviewees in Britain mentioned Aftab Ali as their leader, and to them his role was exemplary. My interviewees were also enthusiastic about Aftab Ali, and noted that his work in the late 1940s and early 1950s made it possible for thousands of migrant workers to settle in Britain. From the archival record, it is evident that Aftab Ali never settled in Britain, even though he was instrumental in organizing 'lascars' in London. His occasional visits to Britain were marked by multiple meetings with seamen, ex-seamen, and Indian leaders residing there, and he established links with the India League. For example, he visited London in 1939 en route to Geneva to attend a conference of the International Labour Organization.<sup>120</sup>

Aftab Ali's activities were noticed within British establishment circles in late 1939, as Indian seamen based in London, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff, and other British ports went on strike in support of economic demands. In November of that year, a resolution was passed during a conference of the India League, held in London, to send protests against the unjust treatment of 'lascar' crews to the Home Secretary, the Minister of Shipping, and Mr C. C. Poole, MP, the Secretary to the India Committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The strike was settled in December through negotiations with the All India Seamen Federation, under the leadership of Aftab Ali, the strikers winning some concessions from the British government.<sup>121</sup>

Left-wing circles in Britain also took note of the militant activities of Indian seamen. In 1939, Aftab Ali was invited by Krishna Menon to attend a meeting of the Glasgow Trades Council on 23 August. B. F. Bradley of the Communist Party of Great Britain arranged for him to visit Manchester, where he duly met ship-owners, British communists, and trade union executives, who were in session there. After discussing matters pertaining to the affairs of seamen, Aftab Ali set up a branch of the Indian Seamen's Union, with the help of Surat Ali and Tahsil Miya. Although Aftab Ali was not a communist, leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain hoped that, as both Surat Ali and Tahsil Miya were being financed by Bradley, any such branch would 'automatically be operated under the guidance of the Party'.<sup>122</sup>

When the Second World War broke out, Aftab Ali continued to organize colonial seamen, and he understood their potential contribution to the war effort. With the wartime demand for seamen rising in 1940, the British government relaxed some rules, allowing 'lascars' to cross the Atlantic, as long as ship-owners and the government of India made no objection.<sup>123</sup> Like Winston Churchill, the Communist Party of India at the time supported the view that

118 Hossain, 'Historical globalization', p. 149.

119 Islam, *Probashir kotha*, pp. 603–6.

120 Yousuf Choudhury, *Routes and tales*, p. 54; Islam, *Probashir kotha*, p. 604.

121 IOR, L/PJ/12/452, 'Public and Judicial Department, Subject: India League and connected organisations', 30 March 1939, p. 45.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

123 IOR, L/E/9/970, Minutes of Economic and Overseas Department, 8 October 1940.

the anti-fascist struggle was an international issue beyond frontiers and ideologies, so it passed a message to all its associated organizations. Accordingly, Aftab Ali, as head of the All India Seamen's Federation, published a leaflet to be circulated in British ports, in which he urged:

In this war, many thousands have already been killed or wounded. They are bringing food and transporting war materials in face of the danger from enemy submarines. Indian seamen want to be useful in this fight against the forces of evil. It is for the authorities and ship owners to take advantage of this eagerness and encourage them by making things easy for them. It is high time that Indian seamen were treated as human beings, and their usefulness recognized for the common victory over the forces of evil and Fascism.<sup>124</sup>

In 1942, the British government in India appointed Aftab Ali Honorary Lieutenant Commander of the Royal Indian Reserve, in recognition of his unconditional support for the anti-fascist war, and of his mediating skills in disputes.<sup>125</sup>

In the East End of London, Sylhetis were heavily involved in the India League, which had Vengalil Krishnan Krishna Menon as its secretary.<sup>126</sup> Krishna Menon, who was from south-west India, studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and at University College London. As a Labour Party member, and co-founder of Penguin Books with Allen Lane, he served as councillor in the Saint Pancras Borough from 1934 to 1947, and was alleged to have had links with the Communist Party. His primary political interest in Britain centred on overseas Indians, particularly seamen.<sup>127</sup>

While in London in 1939 on trade union business, Aftab Ali became embroiled in a power struggle between Surat Ali and Krishna Menon. Aftab Ali participated in the Indian Workers' Conference, organized by Surat Ali (or Alley), who was alleged to be a Bengali Muslim seaman, and had been secretary of the Colonial Seamen's Association since 1935. Suspicious of Surat Ali's communist connections, Aftab Ali briefly supported Krishna Menon. Nonetheless, Surat Ali proved to be more popular, and Krishna Menon soon lost support among Sylheti seamen. Consequently, Aftab Ali switched his own support to Surat Ali.<sup>128</sup>

Caroline Adams suggested that the wider political activism of Sylheti seamen had roots at home, for some of them participated in anti-colonial and Islamic movements when they were in British India. In Britain in the 1940s, some were similarly active in the 'Indian National Congress' and the 'All India Muslim League'. Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi and Ayub Ali Master, who promoted social work among Sylheti seamen, were aware of anti-colonial and Islamic movements in India, and did not keep aloof from them. Increasingly, they mobilized not only against the British Raj but also against what they perceived to be Congress's emerging 'Hindu Raj'. A major example was Ayub Ali Master himself, who was the

124 National Archives of Bangladesh, AISE, All India Seamen Federation's leaflet, December 1941.

125 IOR, L/PJ/12/773; IOR, L/PJ/12/976, 'Indian Seamen's Union & Aftab Ali', 17 April 1994.

126 IOR, L/PJ/12/630, 'All India Seamen's Federation in United Kingdom', 4 December 1939, pp. 13–16.

127 IOR, L/PJ/12/448–56, 'V. K. Menon and India League', 1 May 1939; Suhash Chakravarty, *V. K. Menon and the India League*, 2 vols., New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1997.

128 IOR, L/PJ/12/630, 'All India Seamen's Federation in United Kingdom', 4 December 1939; IOR, L/PJ/12/455; IOR, L/PJ/12/646, 'Indian Seamen's Union & Aftab Ali', 17 April 1994.

president of the UK Muslim League, and reportedly mixed with Liaquat Ali Khan and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.<sup>129</sup> Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi revealed how he shifted his allegiance over time from Congress to the Muslim League.<sup>130</sup> That said, Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi noted that Sylheti seamen might be simultaneously members of the India League, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim Social Club.<sup>131</sup>

## Conclusion

This article argues that socio-cultural and environmental factors created unique circumstances, which drove Sylhetis to become seamen in large numbers from the late nineteenth century. From ancient times, Sylhet was famous for making both ‘country’ and seagoing boats. Sylheti traders and boatmen operated in, and beyond, deltaic Bengal for generations. In the late eighteenth century the Sylhetis became reputed as builders of seaworthy ships for British entrepreneurs, with timber from their jungles. One hundred years later, Sylheti boatmen began to require new employment, because railways and steamships to a large extent displaced river boats in carrying trade goods in the delta. Many Sylhetis had no choice but to engage in the new venture of becoming ‘lascars’, and in this job they particularly excelled. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, forested land was being turned into tea plantations, closing the agrarian frontier for a rapidly growing population. In consequence, Sylhet supplied seamen to Calcutta until the end of the British empire in 1947. Sylheti seamen were not necessarily poor peasants, however, for a cross-section of people moved as a community from Sylhet to Calcutta, went to sea, and settled abroad, mainly in Britain and the United States. Thus, Sylhetis became a global community, in contrast to other inhabitants of Bengal and Assam.

The partition of India in 1947 blocked traditional routes to London and beyond, and many Sylhetis returned to their villages, seemingly without any hope of sailing again. However, some seamen who had earlier been abroad soon began to look for ways to return. During the post-war economic boom, ex-seamen started coming to Britain to work in factories. Currently, up to 90% of Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom are from Sylhet. They remain closely connected with their ancestral families, and constantly look to Sylhet for their heritage. While Sylhetis have over the years earned their global credentials, they are at the same time rooted in their origins and traditions.<sup>132</sup>

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129 IOR, L/PJ/12/630. Also see THLA, P/ADM/1/1.

130 Caroline Adams’ interview with Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi.

131 *Ibid.*

132 Interview with Mushtaq Qureshi.