



Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America

By Vivek Bald

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Nineteenth-century Muslim peddlers arrived at Ellis Island, bags heavy with silks from their villages in Bengal. Demand for “Oriental goods” took these migrants on a curious path, from New Jersey’s boardwalks to the segregated South. Bald’s history reveals cross-racial affinities below the surface of early twentieth-century America.

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Editorial Review

Review

Vivek Bald's work on this untold story is meticulously researched, movingly told, and absolutely timely. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, author of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*)

Vivek Bald's *Bengali Harlem* is a monumental achievement. It brings to life a slice of the U.S. population unknown to the history books: South Asian migrants who came into the United States between the 1890s and the 1940s, making their lives in between African American and migrant spaces. Elegantly assembled, the stories of these migrants and their families are fascinating and heart-rending. (Vijay Prashad, author of *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today*)

Grounded in extraordinary research, *Bengali Harlem* reveals how South Asians became an integral part of black and Puerto Rican communities in the early years of the twentieth century. Historians of black life, culture, and commerce will never again be able to ignore the South Asian presence in African American communities and families. (George Lipsitz, author of *How Racism Takes Place*)

Vivek Bald's extraordinary account persuasively places these first Bengali migrants at the heart of our multiracial American experience. A virtuoso act of recovery. (Junot Díaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*)

Bald vividly recreates the history of South Asian migration to the U.S. from the 1880s through the 1960s. Drawing on ships' logs, census records, marriage documents, local news items, the memoir of an Indian Communist refugee, and interviews with descendants, Bald reconstructs the stories of the Muslim silk peddlers who arrived in 1880s during the fin-de-siècle fascination for Orientalism; the seamen from colonial India who jumped ship at ports along the Eastern seaboard; and the Creole, African-American, and Puerto Rican women they married. Bald persuasively shows how these immigrants provide us with a 'different picture of assimilation.' Global labor migrants, they did not necessarily come seeking a better way of life, nor did they follow a path of upward mobility. In the cases of the silk peddlers who maintained ties to the subcontinent to obtain their goods, they forged extensive global networks yet also assimilated into black neighborhoods, building multiethnic families and communities at a time of exclusionary immigration laws against Asians. By the 1940s, those who stayed had followed the jobs, becoming auto or steel workers in the Midwest, storekeepers in the South, and hotdog vendors or restaurant workers in Manhattan, and, thanks to their wives, had quietly blended into neighborhoods such as Harlem, West Baltimore, Treme in New Orleans and Black Bottom in Detroit. (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) 2012-11-02)

[**Bald**] has produced an engaging account of a largely untold wave of immigration: Muslims from British India who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (Sam Roberts *New York Times* 2012-12-29)

Bald opens readers eyes to a rarely depicted part of the U.S. melting pot. (Richard Pretorius *The National* 2013-02-02)

Captur[es] a unique narrative of inter-marriage and inter-ethnic community making in America. (Yogendra Yadav *Indian Express* 2013-01-29)

A revelatory book...**Vivek Bald**'s new book on Bengali migration tells a history that has been largely

unknown. (Mini Basu *CNN.com* 2013-02-14)

A revelatory account of how the first Bengali migrants quietly merged into America's iconic neighbourhoods. (Mohua Das *The Telegraph (Calcutta)* 2013-03-19)

Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America is a landmark work at exhuming an unknown past of South Asian emigration...It deals in fascinating detail with the little-known narrative of Muslim men travelling from undivided Bengal from the 1880s onwards to seek a living in the U.S. (Shamik Bag *Mint* 2013-06-08)

About the Author

Vivek Bald is Associate Professor of Writing and Digital Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the director of three documentary films: *Taxi-vala/Auto-biography*, *Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music*, and *In Search of Bengali Harlem* (forthcoming). More information can be found at <http://bengaliharlem.com>.

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