Bengali Harlem
and the
Lost Histories
of
South Asian America

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Uptown Basti

When and how did a community of Bengali Muslim ex-seamen begin to coalesce in Harlem? Dada Amir Haider Khan has provided a firsthand account of the "colony" of Indian "seafaring men" who were living near Manhattan's west-side waterfront, around 1920. The children of South Asian men who jumped ship in New York in subsequent decades provide an equally vivid picture of the Bengali–Puerto Rican–African American community that had formed by the 1940s and 1950s in Harlem and other parts of the city. What happened in the twenty intervening years, between Khan's day and midcentury? Archival documents give us some clues. The federal censuses of 1920 and 1930, draft registration records from the First World War, New York City directories, Manhattan marriage certificates, and local news stories all bear traces of the working-class Indian population that was settling into the city during the 1920s and 1930s. Though scattered and disparate, these traces suggest a particular chain of entry into Manhattan: over time, Indian ex-seafarers moved from New York's waterfronts—South Brooklyn, the Syrian district, and Hell's Kitchen—first to the Tenderloin on Manhattan's West Side, then to the Lower East Side, and then up the East Side elevated and subway lines into Central and East Harlem.

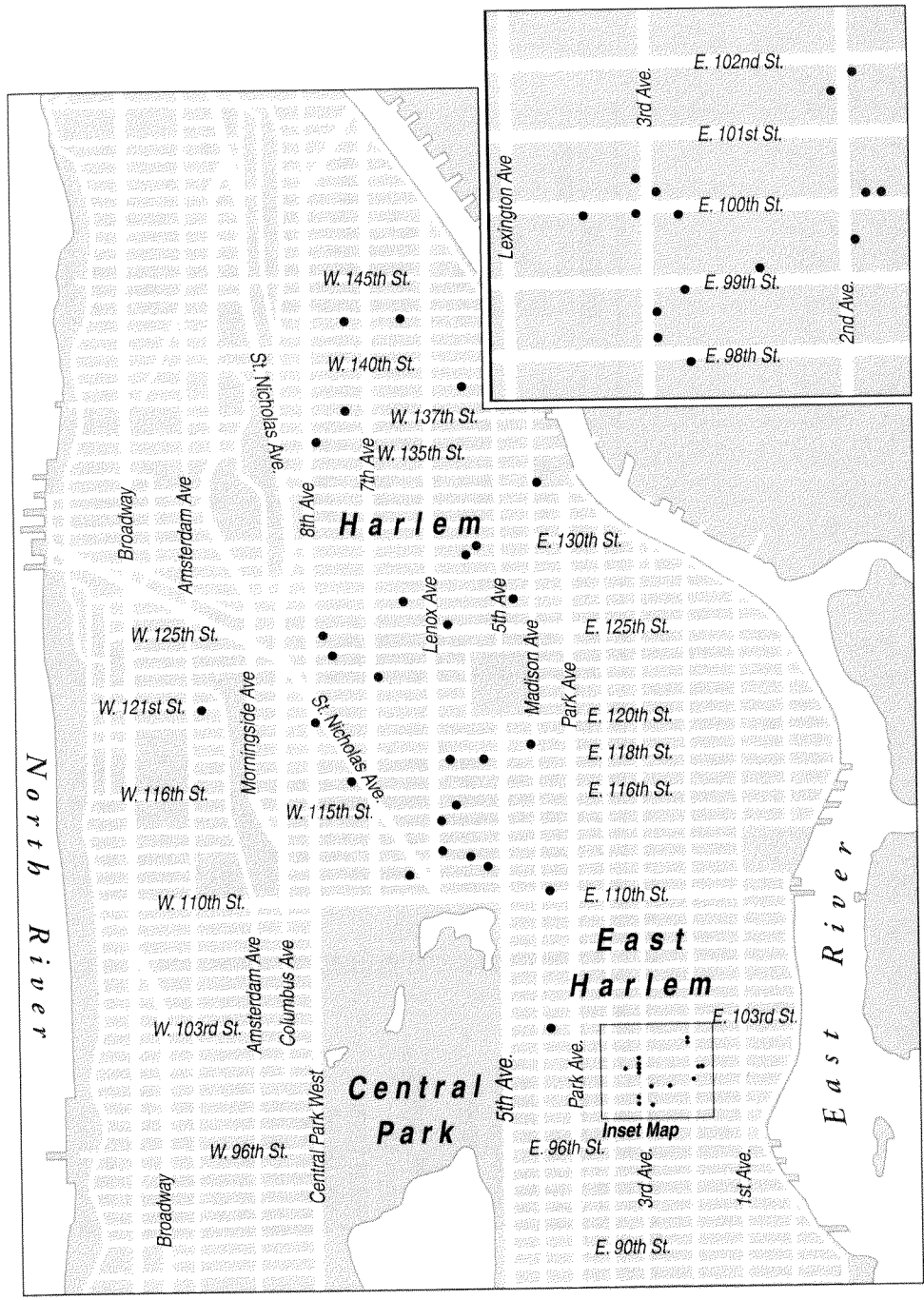
During and immediately after the First World War, the archives show that most of the city's working-class Indian population was living in the Tenderloin, a few blocks from the West Side waterfront, in tenements

spread among the West Thirties and Forties. The characteristics of these men bear out Dada Khan's descriptions and closely mirror the characteristics of the Indian maritime and ex-maritime workforce. They were young, predominantly Muslim men, mostly nonliterate, working jobs in restaurants, hotels, and factories and on ships. The largest number were from Bengal, and the next largest groups appear to have been from Punjab and the Northwest Frontier, with a smaller number from Goa and Ceylon. Even as they were concentrated on the West Side, men from this demographic began to turn up in both the Lower East Side and Harlem during the war years. In 1918, for example, draft registrars recorded a twenty-five-year-old Indian Muslim man, Shooleiman Collu, living on Forsyth Street in the middle of the Lower East Side, working as an itinerant peddler.[8] Two years later, a federal census taker found Fayaz Zaman residing a few blocks away in a building of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland, working as a nickel plater in a local foundry. The Indian presence in Harlem at this time was larger, but less clearly tied to the maritime trade. There were several Caribbean migrants of Indian descent living in Central Harlem among other recent arrivals from British Guiana, Trinidad, and St. Vincent—Hugh and Rose Persaud, Lennox Maharage, Duncan Bourne, Byesing Roy—as well as men who had Anglicized their names—Edward Stevenson, Jack Amere, Joseph Harris. There was one Indian woman, Jane Williams, who was working as a maid for a Jewish family on West 120th Street, and there was Ranji Smile, a curry cook who had taken New York's high society by storm at the turn of the century and was now living in the West 130s. Yet, here again, scattered throughout the neighborhood, were men who fit the profile of escaped Indian seafarers: Nazir Ahmed, who was working as an elevator operator; Aladin Khan, a porter for a downtown candy company; Samuel Ali, a worker in a button factory; Mohammed Karim, a hotel cook.[9]

By the early 1930s, city and federal officials were recording a significantly larger population of working-class Indian men than previously, and their presence on the Lower East Side and in Harlem was becoming more concentrated and more distinct. About two dozen Indian Muslim men were living in the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side in a series of shared apartments on Clinton, Rivington, Norfolk,

Suffolk, Eldridge, and Orchard Streets. They were between nineteen and thirty-five years old and mostly worked in restaurants and hotels as doormen, porters, elevator operators, line cooks, busboys, dishwashers, countermen, and waiters. There were likely more of these men than what the documents show, as many would have thought it best to avoid census-takers and other officials. It is possible, in fact, that Indian men were drawn to the Lower East Side not just because of its low-rent tenements, but also because they could disappear into its dense population of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. It is possible, in addition, that they were drawn to the neighborhood because of its kosher butchers, who, in the absence of a local Muslim community, provided the closest available approximation of halal meat. Uptown, however, the Indian population was even larger than it was on the Lower East Side. When federal census takers canvassed Harlem in April 1930, they recorded more than sixty-five Indian men residing at roughly forty-five different addresses throughout the neighborhood. Most of these men were clustered in two areas: East Harlem (in the eighteen city blocks between East Ninety-Eighth and 103rd Streets and Lexington and First Avenues), where their neighbors were primarily immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, and lower Central Harlem (in the six city blocks bounded by West 112th and 118th Streets and Lenox and Fifth Avenues), where their neighbors were Puerto Rican, Cuban, African American and West Indian (Map 2).[10] It was here, New York's police commissioner claimed in 1932, that men from the subcontinent, barred from officially becoming part of the U.S. nation, sought to disappear into the communities around them, to pass, or even to gain new legal identities as Puerto Rican.[11]

By now, an increasing number of Indian Muslim ex-seamen were marrying within local communities of color. While roughly half the Indian population uptown in the 1930s were single men living as boarders or in small group households, one-third had married and were living with their Puerto Rican, African American, or West Indian spouses. The records of these unions are scattered among the thousands of New York City marriage certificates issued from the early 1920s through the late 1930s (Table 4). The majority of men listed in these records were in their twenties when they got married. They were either working in restaurants or doing other kinds of manual or semiskilled labor—ranging from silk



Map 2. Residences of Indians in Harlem, 1917–1937. Sources: USSS/DRC WWI *Registration Cards* (various, 1917–1918); USDC/BC, *Population Schedules* for New York, NY (various, 1920, 1930); CNY, *Certificates and Records of Marriage* (various, 1920–1937); *New York Amsterdam News*, Marriage Notices and Crime Reports (various, 1926–1937).

dyeing to automobile repair. Many listed "Calcutta" or "Bengal"—rather than simply "East India"—as their place of birth. The women they married were primarily in their late teens and early twenties and were either African American women from various parts of the United States—New York; Baltimore; Jacksonville, Florida; Carlisle, South Carolina—or women from Puerto Rico—San Juan, Vega Baja, Santurce—and in one case, the Dominican Republic. While the African American women in these records were consistently listed as "Colored" or "Negro" and the Puerto Rican women were in most instances classified as "White," the Indian grooms seemed to confound the city marriage clerks' understandings of race. When it came to "color," these men were classified in every possible way: white, colored, Negro, Indian, and East Indian.[12]

The mixed marriages did not go unnoticed in Harlem's local press. In the late 1920s, unions between Indian men and African American and Puerto Rican women began to appear in the pages of the neighborhood's most prominent black periodical, the *New York Amsterdam News*. Initially, these were simply entries among the newspaper's lists of the neighborhood's marriage certificate "issues"; in June 1927, for example, the issue of licenses to "Ali, Mokhd, 2971 West 36th street [and] Miss Mabel Leola Gibson, 36 West 128th Street" as well as to "Kriam, Abdul, 322 West 141st street and Miss Mildred Hayes, 242 West 146th street," were among a list of fifty-five "recent issues."[13] In 1932, a similar certificate issue warranted its own short paragraph. Under the headline "To Wed East Indian," the *Amsterdam News* wrote, "Nosir Meah, 27, who said that he was born in Bombay, India, has obtained a license to wed Miss Lillian Ponds, a domestic, 1926 Second avenue. Meah lives at 301 West 102d street."[14] By 1935, the *News* reported at greater length not merely on the issue of a marriage license, but also on the private reception following an Indian–African American wedding. Both the content and the tone of the article—familiar and matter-of-fact—suggest that such occurrences were gradually becoming a normal part of the social life of Harlem:

> The many friends of Mr. and Mrs. Syedali Miah, newlyweds, attended a wedding reception in their honor at their home, 260 West 125th Street, last Friday evening. The Miahs were married at the Eighteenth Street Methodist Church . . . on April 5. The Rev. Charles F. Divine officiated. Mrs. Miah, formerly Miss Marguerite Richardson, is the daughter of Harper Richardson, 401 West 149th street. Her uncle, Charlie Anderson, with whom she made her home, is a well-known dancing teacher with studios at 2323 Seventh Avenue. Mr. Miah is a native of Bengal, India.[15]

The *Amsterdam News* did not merely report on the joyous moments of such marriages, however. Its pages suggest that these unions were complicated and that lives on both "sides" of each marriage could be precarious. On March 1, 1933, for example, the paper reported on the sentencing of "Kotio Miah . . . formerly of 267 West 137th street" to "two-and-a-half to five years" on charges of bigamy. "Miah's first wife, Belicia Jimenez," the *News* wrote, "a South American whom he married in 1927, claimed that he left her in 1932 to marry Carmen Jimenez, a Porto Rican, without obtaining a divorce. Miah's trial was unique in the annals of General Sessions in that the defendant was convicted, his attorney was fined $25 for contempt of court, and his six witnesses, all hailing from India, were arrested by immigration officials for unlawful entry into the country as fast as they left the witness stand."[16]

The appearance of Indian men in the *Amsterdam News*' crime reports provides another view of their entry into the everyday life of Harlem during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As in Kotio Miah's bigamy case, the Indians appeared in these reports both as accused perpetrators and as victims:

> March 10, 1926: Hubidad Ullah . . . said that he came uptown to have a good time with two other friends. . . . [T]hey were standing on the corner of 134th street and Lenox avenue when he saw [Fannie] Dials . . . whom he had known for about one week. . . . Hubidad said that she insisted upon them going to her apartment. . . . [He] said that he was invited into a separate room by the woman, who hugged and kissed him repeatedly. Having a slight craving for more whiskey, Hubidad . . . went into his pocket to get more money and . . . [discovered] his wallet [was missing].

April 9, 1930: Wyatt Griffin, 24, 103 West 121st street, was held without bail when charged by Abdul Mohammed, 2051 Seventh avenue, with luring him into [a] hallway . . . where he is alleged to have attempted to rob [Mohammed] after threatening him with a blackjack.

April 23, 1930: Abdul Hack, 35, 225 East Ninety-ninth street, was held without bail for a further hearing on a charge of illegally possessing drugs.

November 19, 1930: Abdul Kader, an East Indian, 124 West 127th street, was taken to Bellevue Hospital for observation Thursday evening by police after he had terrified tenants of the apartment in which he lived. Kader brandished a revolver and shot at residents until he was subdued by two policemen.[17]

While they present only glimpses of lives in moments of crisis, when entanglements with sexual desire, petty crime, mental anguish, and violence erupted into public view, these early fragments of evidence suggest an Indian population that was already part of the fabric of intimate relationships and daily struggles of Depression-era Harlem.

Hot Dogs and Curry

By the 1930s, Indian men were working in a wide variety of jobs across the city; the ex-maritime population was integrating into the larger fabric of working-class life both in Harlem and in New York City as a whole. The 1930 census shows that their occupations ran the gamut of service industry and semiskilled work: "counterman . . . chauffer . . . fireman . . . porter . . . elevator operator . . . laundry worker . . . meat worker . . . dress factory helper . . . mechanic . . . painter . . . packer . . . subway laborer."[18] For a smaller number of men, Harlem appears to have provided a field in which to pursue different kinds of possibilities, beyond the realm of service work and manual labor. S. Abedin, who listed his occupation as "shellac importer," shared an apartment on 119th Street in Central Harlem with a mechanic, M. Yusef, and a restaurant laborer, Ghulam Husein. Four self-employed "artists," Harry, Raymond, Abraham, and Emanuel Rahman, lived on 111th Street and Lenox Avenue, and one "artist's model," Mougal Khan, lived on 129th Street between Fifth and Lenox Avenues.[19] For those who sought a way out of restaurant, hotel, and factory jobs, however, there appear to have been two much more common paths: either they found semi-independent work as food vendors on the streets or they opened restaurants and other small businesses of their own.

Helen Ullah, a Puerto Rican resident of East Harlem who married a Bengali ex-seaman—Saad "Victor" Ullah—in the mid-1940s, describes a string of Indian Muslim hot-dog vendors who were operating in East Harlem at that time, selling from pushcarts up and down Madison, Lexington, and Third Avenues. Much more than those who worked in factories all day or in the kitchens and basements of midtown restaurants and hotels, these men became a part of the everyday social landscape of Harlem, serving and interacting with the whole range of people who lived and worked in the neighborhood. They were also key to maintaining a fabric of community among the different Indian men and their families in the area; Indians would visit their friends' pushcarts on their way through the neighborhood each day, says Ullah, both to catch up on news and gossip—"to stop and say 'Hello, how are you?' and 'How are the kids?' and so forth"—and to eat the hot dogs themselves: "If it was pork, they wouldn't touch it, but they always knew it was safe to eat from other Indians' wagons." For Helen's youngest sister, Felita, the hot-dog vendors were a guarantee of safe passage through the neighborhood; as a child, she remembers navigating from one pushcart to the next, knowing that her brother-in-law Saad's friends would keep a watchful eye on her.[20] Those men who could save or raise enough capital, and who could navigate the legal terrain, went a step further to start up businesses and restaurants. The businesses were usually modest ventures. "They would set up . . . a little storefront," Ullah remembers, "and sell little knick-knacks . . . or they [would sell] . . . herbs and curry powders . . . spices." One Indian migrant became a neighborhood tailor. Another, who went by the name Paul, set up a small jewelry shop on East 103rd Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, which, beyond the actual business it did, became one of the favorite meeting places for the Bengalis who lived in the area, who would come to the shop to sit with Paul, drink tea, argue, and gossip.[21]