

Bengali Harlem
and the
Lost Histories
of
South Asian America

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“Indian Sailors Strike for Grub”

In 1925, around the time Amir Haider Khan was leaving the United States and Mustafa “John” Ali was arriving, the Baltimore *Afro-American*, one of the county’s national black weeklies, ran a banner headline across the top of page 9 about a group of Indian seamen who had arrived in port in Baltimore. In some ways, the article resembled those stories about “curious lascars” that had run in more mainstream U.S. newspapers at the turn of the century, and continued to appear in those papers even in the 1920s. The *Afro-American*’s article, for example, spoke of a “mutiny” on the high seas; it focused in on one of the Indian men’s “peculiar red whiskers” (presumably his beard, died with henna) and mentioned that the men would not eat food “prepared by unbelievers.” But the similarities ended there. The main point of the article was in fact to explain how a group of Indian seamen now under arrest in Baltimore had come to the verge of attacking their employer. It described the men’s poor working conditions on their ship and detailed their mistreatment at the hands of the ship’s officers. It explained that the captain had refused to provide them with food prepared according to the tenets of their “Mohammedan faith” and highlighted the stand they took midvoyage by refusing to work. The *Afro-American* dispatched a reporter to speak not to the ship’s captain, but to the arrested men, to hear their story in their own words. The paper also sent a photographer, so they could show their readership the six sailors who stood up for their rights on board. The headline that ran in bold letters across the full length of one page of the newspaper spoke of the “alleged” mutiny of these men, and the subheads fleshed out the details: “India Seamen Arrested; Tell Harrowing Tale—Five Dollars Monthly Wage and Meatless Diet Caused Near Mutiny on Ship—Brutality and Hard Life of Jack London Stories Are Recalled at Police Station.” Above the photograph of the six men, displayed prominently at the top of the page, was the heading: “East Indian Sailors Strike for Grub.” Just below, the photo caption indicated one man among the

Indians who was more likely of Somali or North African descent and pointed out that he was “undoubtedly of African parentage.”¹¹¹

In its important respects, the *Afro-American's* article could not have been more different from those of the era's white-owned papers. The six seamen were presented here as human beings and, specifically, as workers of color, whose stories were important and whose actions were logical, reasonable, and even commendable. Their dietary observances were not the focus of ridicule or voyeurism but were rather aspects of their faith that their captain was wrong to deny them. Just as Mamie Chase's family and others on Baltimore's African American Westside welcomed Indian men into their families and communities—men who had otherwise been rendered “illegal” by the nation's racialized immigration regime—this black newspaper embraced a group of Indian seamen who had struck against an injustice and ended up in a Baltimore jail. Their story would have resonated with the others that filled the *Afro-American's* pages every week, of African American women and men subjected to the violence and injustice of white supremacy and criminalized for fighting back. The affinity that the *Afro-American* showed for these Indian “mutineers” was not isolated; this was a historical moment in which African American and Indian nationalist leaders were coming to recognize and articulate the connections between their struggles.¹¹² Maritime desertion, however, led to its own arena of contact between the two groups, and as the story of Dada Amir Haider Khan makes clear, that arena could produce its own understandings and transformations.