

CHOUDHURY ZAMAN ALI: AN ACCIDENTAL MIGRANT

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The Indian Empire, economic from The Imperial Gazetteer of India, volume 3, 1907.

Choudhury Zaman Ali was born in the early twentieth century in the village of Kalyal, Mirpur, in Azad Kashmir in modern Pakistan. He received little formal education and could only speak Mirpuri. Local opportunities were few for a poor, uneducated man from a rural area. When Zaman was growing up, Pakistan was part of Britain's Indian Empire and, like many young Asians, he found employment in the merchant navy.

Sailing the seas might have been the summit of his achievements had not his ship docked in Hull, Yorkshire, at some time during the 1930s. Zaman went to explore the town, got lost and missed his ship when it left port. He could not speak English, but he found his way to London. London was a place of opportunity and it already possessed an Asian community. The first two MPs from British India were elected to Parliament for London seats in the late nineteenth century. Gandhi had lived there and the city was home to students who were supporters of self-government for British India.

Zaman's first job was for a film company which was looking for people who could ride horses and he acted in two other films. He saved money and started a business selling goods. In the 1940s he moved to Birmingham which was relatively prosperous with plenty of work. At a party, he met his future wife Margaret, who later told a journalist: "It was love at first sight. At the time I never realised that the person I was falling

for couldn't speak a word of English. It was his simplicity which impressed me most. If there is love between two individuals, language is no barrier."

They purchased a drapery shop selling clothes in Balsall Heath. Margaret ran the business whilst Zaman gave advice to newly-arrived settlers from Pakistan and settled quarrels between husbands and wives. Locally he led campaigns to establish a Muslim graveyard and create Birmingham's Central Mosque in Highgate in the 1970s. He also served as President of the Muslim League in Britain and when prominent visitors came from Pakistan, he acted as their host. In his home village, he helped set up a school for girls and a hospital.

Choudhury Zaman Ali died in 1983 at the age of eighty. People from all over the UK came to his funeral and the government of Pakistan sent a representative. His work enabled many Pakistani migrants to adjust to life in Britain, but towards the end of his life he became disillusioned. He told the journalist Sultan Mahmood: "Britain is not what she used to be....There's a lot of racial hatred....People do not like each other due to their different creed and colour of skin. They are also becoming less tolerant. I wonder where all those good English people have disappeared." ●

Further Reading

Makhdoom Chishti (ed.), *Lok Virsa - Cultural Voyage: Exploring the Muslim Heritage* (Brewin Books, 2008).