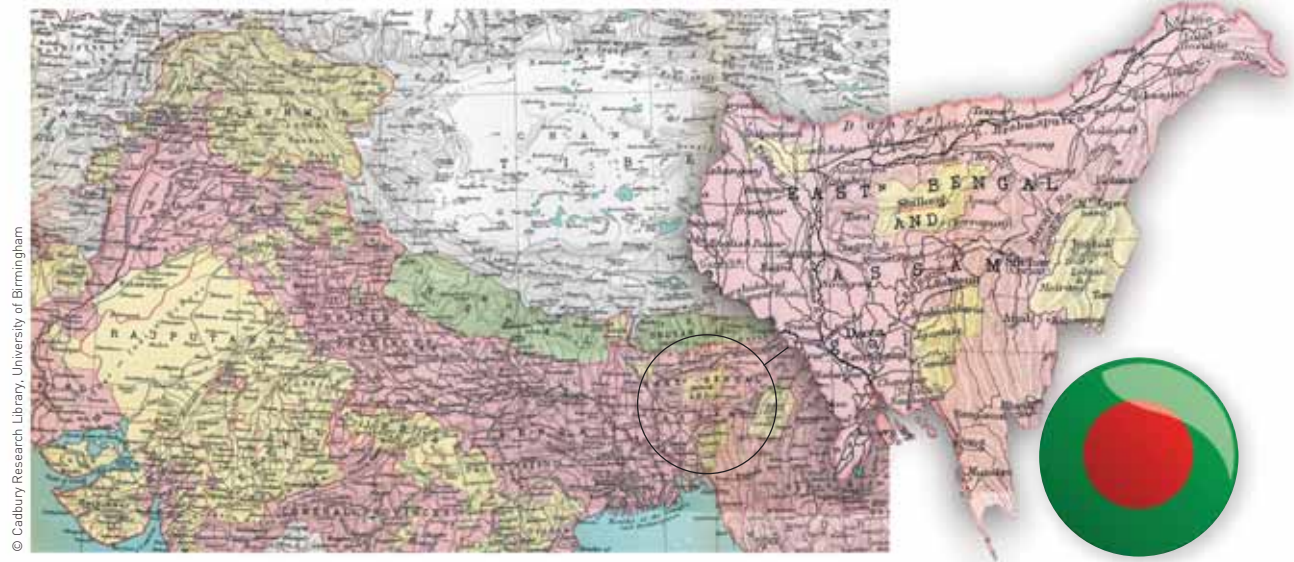


YOUSUF CHOUDHURY: A BRITISH BANGLADESHI

Malcolm Dick



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

When Yousuf Choudhury was born in 1928 in Sylhet, an agricultural district of East Bengal, he was a citizen of Britain's Indian Empire. In 1947, East Bengal became East Pakistan, part of the new state of Pakistan and in 1971, it achieved independence as Bangladesh. There was little work in Sylhet, so many men gained employment in Britain's merchant navy, working for lower wages than British sailors. The ships, however, docked in British ports, which enabled the men to leave and seek better-paid jobs.

In 1957, Choudhury came to Birmingham to join his elderly uncle who was his family's main breadwinner. The city was already home to Bengalis who were employed in local metal foundries. By English standards wages were low, but they were able to send money they had saved back home to their families. He developed a keen interest in photography, turned semi-professional and established a studio. As well as taking portraits, he also began to photograph the lives of his fellow Bengalis.

The 1960s witnessed growing tension between East and West Pakistan as Bengalis sought to create their own country. Choudhury identified with this aim and photographed the pro-independence meetings by Bengalis in Britain. In 1971, East Pakistan declared independence and became Bangladesh. During the short-lived but bloody war with West Pakistan, law and order and communications broke down and he lost contact with his daughter, Rohina. Desperate to find her, he flew to India and crossed the border into Bangladesh. Fortunately he found she was safe and he returned to Birmingham with her. The human

story of a father's rescue of his daughter was widely reported in British newspapers and on the radio. During his search for Rohina, he made a photographic record of the country, which was published in 2004 as *An Album of the 1971 Bangladeshi Liberation Movement*.

Towards the end of his life, Yousuf's desire to chronicle the Bangladeshi experience grew. He recorded the lives of Bangladeshis who had left their homeland to settle in Britain. The first results were published in 1993 as *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers*, which revealed the lives of the first Bengali settlers in the UK. It vividly relates how they lived in cold and overcrowded boarding houses, slept in shifts and formed relationships with local women. Another book published in 1995, *Sons of Empire*, was based on interviews with Bengalis who had served on British ships in two World Wars. He also focused on the restaurant trade where Bengalis made a huge contribution; the results were published in 2002 as *The Book of Indian Subcontinental Cooking in Britain*.

When Yousuf Choudhury died in 2002, he had shown why Bangladeshis had come to Britain, how they had contributed to the country and their role in its wartime struggles for survival. The records he created are pioneering examples of what community history can achieve. ●

Further Reading

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

Yousuf Choudhury and Peter Drake, *From Bangladesh to Birmingham* (Birmingham City Council, 2001).