

## South Asian Migration and Colonial Records: Some Challenges in Reconstructing the Bengali Historical Migration<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article explores transregional connectivity between South and Southeast Asia, which facilitated the mobility of people, goods, ideas, and plants. However, imprecise labeling of diverse South Asian migrants in colonial records has made it difficult to reconstruct the historical migration of specific South Asian communities. This paper proposes techniques to recover their history, using the example of Bengali mobility, by consulting archival documents, oral testimonies, and other primary sources. This study calls on academics, historians, and experts on mobility studies to be vigilant of indiscriminate categorizing systems in colonial records because stereotypes and imprecise ethnic identity in such records may mislead them.

**Keywords:** colonial records, India, South Asia, Bengal, Bengali Migrants, British Malaya, Straits Settlements, Malay World.

Human mobility is as old as human history. The most extensive and rigorous human mobility took place in the medieval era under different Muslim empires across Asia, Europe, and Africa, followed by the post-feudal European “Age of Discovery.” Such mobility took a major turn during the European colonial era, impacting all corners of the world and particularly Asia: Sunil Amrith recently suggested that migration was at the heart of Asian history during the modern era.<sup>2</sup> Before the twentieth century, Oceanic transport was most significant for connections between South and Southeast Asia, enabling the mobility of humans, goods, ideas, and plants. The Bengalis, among other South Asians, were one of these migrating communities; prolific Bengali historian R. C. Majumdar and others suggest that Bengalis have been traveling widely in Southeast Asia since at least the third century BCE.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sunil Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), i.

<sup>3</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East, Vol II, Suvarnavipa*, part 1 (Dacca: Asoke Kumar Majumdar, 1937), 385, 397-98; P. C. Chakravarti, “Economic Conditions,” in *The History of Bengal. Vol. 1, Hindu Period*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943), 660-62; Adhir Chakrabarty, “Bangla o Bahirbissho (Prag Uponibesik Kal)” [Bengal and Overseas: Pre-colonial Era], in *Itihas Onusshandhan* [Quest for History] No. 4, ed. Gautam Chhotopadhyay (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi and Co., 1989), 52, 55; Ashin Das Gupta, *Vanghap Sagar* [The Bay of Bengal] (Calcutta: Pritikxan Publication, 1989), 13, 20, 22; D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (Hampshire and London: McMillan Education Ltd., 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1981), 13.

With European colonization, transregional connectivity between South and Southeast Asia took a new turn, facilitating South Asian migration to Southeast Asia. However, South Asian migrants were categorized homogeneously as “Indian” in colonial records despite their diversity. Umbrella terms were not limited to describing South Asians; many other ethnic migrating groups across the world were collapsed into these general categories. For example, Africa is home to rich cultures and diverse ethnic communities, many of whom were displaced by colonialism and slavery. Some fifty African ethnic and linguistic groups were forcibly moved to the Americas alone.<sup>4</sup> However, the appellation “African” is a misnomer: African diasporic communities, particularly Yoruba, Akan, or Malinke, identify within their specific ethnic groups rather than wanting to be categorized regionally, transethnically, or continentally. In this vein, Colin Palmer has documented diverse African ethnic communities and their cultures in the US.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars dissect the ethnic identity of “Africans” and thus reconstruct the histories of Benin, Niger, Morocco, Allada, and Angola.<sup>6</sup> After 1945, historians emphasized national identity in studies of “African” migrants, such as Ghanaian and Tanzanian migrants in England and in the US.<sup>7</sup>

Latin America covers the regions of South America, Central America, Mexico, and the islands of the Caribbean. The people of these regions share the experience of colonization, mostly by the Spanish and Portuguese empires. It was the home of diverse indigenous peoples, such as the Toltecs, Aztecs, Caribs, Maya, Tupi, and Inca, during the pre-Columbian era. However, soon after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, indigenous elites lost their power to the Europeans, which caused an unprecedented transcontinental migration: the influx of 60 million Europeans, 11 million Africans, and 5 million Asians.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, there are many ethnic groups of different ancestry or ethnicity, including European, Amerindian, and African, and a mix of any of these. Regardless of the diverse cultures and ethnicities, scholars ascribe them a common

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<sup>4</sup>“African-American Migrations, 1600s to Present,” PBS, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/on-african-american-migrations/>.

<sup>5</sup> Colin A. Palmer, “From Africa to the Americas: Ethnicity in the Early Black Communities of the Americas,” *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (1995): 223-236.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Law, “Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey,” *Journal of African History* 27, no. 2 (1986): 237-267; John Wright, “Morocco: The Last Great Slave Market?” *Journal of North African Studies*, 7, 3 (2002): 53-66; J. N. Oriji, “The Slave Trade, Warfare and Aro Expansion in the Igbo Hinterland,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 16 (1987): 151-166; Robin Law, “The Slave Trade in Seventeenth-Century Allada: A Revision,” *African Economic History* 22 (1994): 59-92; J. C. Miller, “The Numbers, Origins, and Destinations of Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century Angolan Slave Trade,” *Social Science History* 13, no. 4 (1989): 381-419.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, James Burns, “The West is Cold: Experiences of Ghanaian Performers in England and the United States,” in *The New African Diaspora*, eds. Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 127-45; Helena Anin-Boateng, “Migration and Bereavement: How Ghanaian Migrants Cope in the United Kingdom,” in *The New African Diaspora*, eds. Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 146-163; Msia Kibona Clark, “Questions of Identity among African Immigrants in America,” *The New African Diaspora*, eds. Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 255-270. Msia Kibona Clark examines Tanzanian migrants in the USA.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Bodenheimer, “What Is Latin America? Definition and List of Countries,” ThoughtCo., accessed August 28, 2022, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-latin-america-4691831>.

identity by using the umbrella term “Latin American” for them.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have maintained the stringent enumeration systems of colonial times. However, W. F. Searle discusses the nature of colonial statistics and suggests scholars need a policy on priorities, standards of work, and the adaptation of the normal methods of official statistics to colonial conditions.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, a combined term for a diverse migrating community may cause difficulties for reconstructing the history of multi-ethnic diasporas.

Stringent systems of enumeration and categorization of migrants were similarly problematic in Asia. Adam McKeown explores mass migration in North and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> The arrival of European powers, particularly the British East India Company (EIC) brought South and Southeast Asia under a single administration which greatly facilitated emigration from South Asia to Southeast Asia. However, South Asian migrants who were of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural origin, were mostly categorized as “Indian.”

The above examples show that colonial powers and colonialism homogenized the identity of diverse migrating communities, such as “African,” “Latin American,” and “Indian.” This categorization, which of course finds itself in archival documents, makes it difficult to historically reconstruct the migration of any specific ethnic community. The double aim of this article is to study a neglected topic using a non-traditional methodology. The historical migration of Bengalis across South and Southeast Asia is important for adding depth and nuance to our knowledge of colonial history and intra-Asian migration, yet it cannot be studied through traditional readings of colonial records. This article will employ non-traditional techniques such as rereading colonial records, oral history, and revisiting other primary sources, allowing for a reconstruction of historical migration through the lens of the history of Bengali migrants as a subgroup of the “Indians” present in colonial records.<sup>12</sup> This reveals that the descendants of Bengali migrants were integral to establishing a cosmopolitan Malayan society and developed socio-cultural spaces of their own since the end of colonial rule.

The mobility of South Asians during the precolonial era is visible primarily through their commercial enterprise and the circulation of ideas. Chittagong port was prominent not only for trade but also for the spread of South Asian culture. Anthony Reid and R. C. Majumdar demonstrate how Buddhism and Islam were disseminated from Bengal to Southeast Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey G. Williamson, “Latin American Inequality: Colonial Origins, Commodity Booms or a Missed Twentieth-Century Leveling?” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 16, no. 3 (2015): 324-341.

<sup>10</sup> Searle was concerned not only about inaccurate population census data but also the lack of complete reports on various sectors in colonial territories such as Malaya, the West Indies, Africa, Cyprus, and Mauritius. He informed about the paucity of data on agricultural production and food supplies, statistics of livestock populations, minerals, and fisheries. Therefore, he suggested implementing an innovative method to read colonial statistics. See W. F. Searle, E. J. Phillips and C. J. Martin, “Colonial Statistics: A Discussion before the Royal Statistical Society Held on March 22nd, 1950, Mr. H. Campion, C. B., Vice-President in the Chair,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 113, no. 3 (1950): 271-298; Gerard L. M. Clauson, “Some Uses of Statistics in Colonial Administration,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 36, no. 145 (1937): 3-16.

<sup>11</sup> Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 (2004): 155-189.

<sup>12</sup> An ethnolinguistic group of people mainly from present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal of India.

Majumdar and Ganguly suggest that Bengal was extensively involved in developing the cultural links between the diverse civilizations of Eastern and Southeastern Asia for nearly 1,500 years.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the ports of Chittagong and Malacca played a crucial role in the exchange of cultures and commodities.<sup>14</sup>

Around 1509, there were about forty thousand merchants in Malacca, of whom one third was Gujarati, and the rest were of diverse ethnicities: *Klings*, Chuliahs, Bengalis, Persians, and Malabaris.<sup>15</sup> No fewer than eighty-four different languages, including Bangla, were found on Malacca's streets and in its bazaars in the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The Bengali merchants imported a range of manufacturing and agricultural products, including textiles, rice, wheat, salt, gram, sugar, opium, clarified butter, and saltpeter. In return, merchants exported spices, camphor, porcelain, sandalwood, ivory, metals, conch shells, and cowries.<sup>17</sup> In the early sixteenth century, Tomé Pires described the precolonial transregional connectivity and the flow of commodities between Bengal and the Malay world and noted that the Bengali merchants with vast fortunes sailed by junks.<sup>18</sup> Apart from Malacca, Bengali merchants were found in Barus port (Sumatra), Pase, Aceh (on the Java coast), Banda Island, and the ports of Siam (Thailand) during the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Anil Das has shared details of the movement of Bengali merchants and commodities in the Malay world during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid, *The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 398-401; R. C. Majumdar, "The Palas," in *The History of Bengal. Vol. 1, Hindu Period*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943), 121-2; R. C. Majumdar and D. C. Ganguly, "Bengalis Outside Bengal" in *The History of Bengal. Vol. 1, Hindu Period*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943), 670-688.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 94; Dirk Hoerder, "Crossing the Waters: Historic Developments and Periodizations before the 1830s," in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, eds. Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Winstedt, *Malaya and its History* (London: Hutchinson House, 1951), 20; M. R. Fernando, "Continuity and Change in Maritime Trade in the Straits of Melaka in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Trade, Circulation, and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Michael Pearson (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 114.

<sup>16</sup> Kernial Sing Sandhu, "Indian Settlements in Melaka," in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital, c. 1400-1980, Vol. II*, eds. Kernial Sing Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 179.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Andaya, "Massoi and Kain Timur in the Birdshead Peninsula of New Guinea, the Easternmost Corner of the Indian Ocean World," in *Trade, Circulation, and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Michael Pearson (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Armando Cortesao (trans. and ed.), *The Suma Oriental of the Tome Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca, and India in 1512-1515*, Vol. 1 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), 88, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan and Reid, *The Eastern Islamic World*, 389, 398-99; C. M. Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1981), 20; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Vol. II, Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 93.

<sup>20</sup> Anil Das, "Bengali Kobi o Bideshi Parjatok der Dristy te Bengalir Banijjo," [Bengali Trade Through the Lens of Bengali Poets and Foreign Travellers], in *Itihas Onusshandhan* [Quest for History] No. 4, ed. Gautam Chottopadhyay (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi and Co., 1989), 108-114.

Bengali merchants did business in the Malay Peninsula and assisted in managing the Malacca Port during the precolonial period.<sup>21</sup> Parameswara (1344–c.1414), a Malay nobleman, converted to Islam, renamed himself Iskandar Shah, and established the Malacca Sultanate. As the first Sultan of Malacca, he founded a port in 1400, and to avoid petty corruption, Sultan Iskandar Shah established a hierarchy of four harbor managers representing Gujaratis, Bengalis, Malays, and East Asians.<sup>22</sup> The Portuguese and Dutch East India Companies colonized Malacca in 1511 and 1641, respectively, and Malacca was given to the British in 1824 through the Anglo-Dutch treaty. However, Bengali foreign trade had already started to decline during the seventeenth century because of the stringent regulations of the Portuguese and Dutch governors in Malacca and the arrival of British merchants in Bengal.<sup>23</sup> The Bengal Nawab's mercantile marine had consisted of about twenty ships which annually sailed from Dacca to Balasore, Pipli, Ceylon, and Tenassarim during the early seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup> By the late seventeenth century, the number of Bengali ships that visited Southeast Asia had shrunk to between six and eight.<sup>25</sup>

With the arrival of the Europeans on the rims of the Bay of Bengal, Bengalis came to Malaya in different functions, including as enslaved people and later as imperial subjects. Europeans introduced enslaved Bengalis to the global slave-trading network. D. G. E. Hall suggests that from 1623 onward, the Dutch frequently visited Chittagong to buy Bengali slaves captured by marauding Portuguese known as *Ferringhi*.<sup>26</sup> Rik van Welif counts approximately 100,000 enslaved people, possibly more, were taken by the Dutch from many regions, including

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<sup>21</sup> Ingelise Lamont Lanman, "The Fabric of Malay Nationalism on the Malay Peninsula: 1920-1940" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988); Mariam Pirbhai, "The Multiple Voices of Indenture History: The South Asian Diasporic Novel in English" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Université de Montreal, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Michael G. Vann, "When the World Came to Southeast Asia: Malacca and the Global Economy," *Newsletter, Association for Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 22; Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830, Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 805.

<sup>23</sup> Balthasar Bort, "Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca 1678, trans. [from the Dutch] M. J. Bremner with an introduction and notes by C. O. Blagden," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* V, no. I (1927): 1-232; Romesh Dutt, *The Economic History of India: Under Early British Rule (From the Rise of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1837)*, Vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1902), 39; W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. V (London: Trübner and Co., 1875), 124.

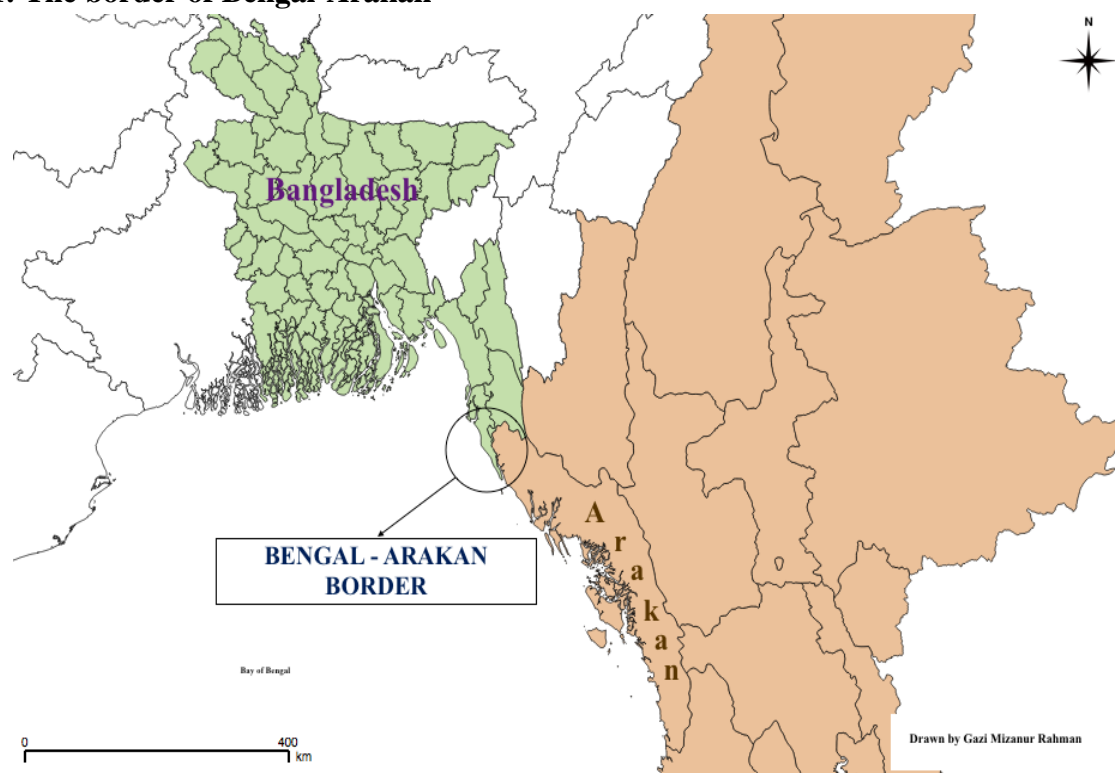
<sup>24</sup> Radhakumud Mookerji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (Calcutta, London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 234; Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya* (London and New York: John Lane Company, 1907), 29; For premodern Bengali maritime trade, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Notes on the Sixteenth Century Bengal Trade," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 24, no. 3 (1987): 265-289; Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> Fernando, "Continuity and Change in Maritime Trade in the Straits of Melaka," 126; Morgan and Reid, *The Eastern Islamic World*, 468.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 417.

the Bengal-Arakan border, shown on Map 1.<sup>27</sup> The Dutch employed them as domestic servants or agricultural laborers in their colonies.<sup>28</sup>

**Map 1: The border of Bengal-Arakan**



With the establishment of the British imperial administration and transregional networks in the 1830s, Bengali mobility remained stable during colonial rule across the Malay world. Along with other regions, the British East India Company created linkages between South and Southeast Asia. They formed the Straits Settlements with Singapore, Malacca, and Penang, which were governed from Calcutta. Such administrative linkages with the maritime highway created opportunities in various capacities for networks and interdependences. Besides, Bengal constituted a land bridge between South and Southeast Asia through the Myanmar-Thailand border. Such transregional connectivity facilitated the mobility of people, goods, plants, and ideas.

During the colonial period, a large number of Asians migrated within and beyond Asia (see Table 1). British colonialists and capitalists needed laborers to support their flourishing economy in Malaya. They considered the Malay people “lazy and useless” and spread divisive myths among the Malay and other ethnic communities about the Malay being idle people. The British believed

<sup>27</sup> Rik van Welif, “Slave Trading and Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire: A Global Comparison,” *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 82 (2008): 72.

<sup>28</sup> Richard M. Eaton, Introduction to *Slavery and South Asian History*, eds. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 12.

that Malay people had no desire for prosperity and worked only for their own needs.<sup>29</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas critically analyzes the colonial construction of the myth of “lazy natives” with reference to Malay, Filipino, and Javanese laborers between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries and shows the origins and impacts of the myth.<sup>30</sup> This colonialist view, however, was the motivation for bringing South Asians to the Malay Peninsula, and it was also reflected in the European demand for labor. In the 1880s, for example, two European Estate Managers sought permission from the colonial government to bring unindentured Indian laborers to the rubber plantations of the Malay states because they were allegedly cheap, industrious, abundant, and tractable.<sup>31</sup>

**Table 1: Migrations in Modern Asia and Beyond**

Years	Origins	Destinations	Numbers (millions)
1800-1940	British India, South China	Burma, Ceylon, parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands as well as on the coast of Africa, South America, and the Caribbean Islands	48-52
1840-1940	British India	Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya	30
1846-1940	Northeastern Asia and Russia	Manchuria, Siberia, Central Asia, and Japan	46-51
1846-1940	British India, China, Japan	Americas	2.5

**Source:** Adapted from Joseph P. Ferrie and Timothy J. Hatton, “Two Centuries of International Migration,” IZA, Bonn, Discussion Paper No. 7866, December 2013; Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 28; Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 (2004): 156.

Table 1 shows that most Asian migrants originated from China and British India, present-day South and East Asian countries. However, migrants of diverse South Asian ethnicities were categorized in colonial records under common heads such as “Indians,” “prohibited immigrants,”

<sup>29</sup> Swettenham, *British Malaya*, 169-70, 304-305; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>30</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

<sup>31</sup> Carl A. Trocki, “Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Vol. 2, The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 113.

“aliens,” “natives of Asia,” and “Asiatic.”<sup>32</sup> Along with these categorizations, the reports of the Straits Settlements of British Malaya listed people from Bengal also as “Bengali and other natives of India” until the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Benedict Anderson criticizes these stringent systems of enumeration and points to the colonial construction of race and ethnicity. He further shows how the identity of “aboriginal Eden” and “Cochin-Chinese” was misplaced in the colonial demographic topography in the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>34</sup> European colonies worldwide generalized diverse ethnicities and used umbrella terms for them in colonial records.

Colonial authorities were concerned about generating trade profits and increasing their revenue income, therefore ethnic diversity did not matter to colonial enterprise. Anderson suggests that those umbrella terms displayed the “*mentalité* of the British colonial census-makers,” and that colonial administrators were unaware of the construction of ethnic-identity-based classifications; instead, they were interested in “systematic quantification” of the population.<sup>35</sup> It is problematic to tag all South Asian migrants in that peculiar way because the people from India were (and are) different in terms of region, religion, culture, and language. This generalization by colonial authorities creates serious challenges to reconstructing the historical migration of specific ethnic groups, including the Bengali, from South Asia. Public officers prepare government census reports, which historians consider as useful and reliable primary evidence for reconstructing history. The shortcomings of government reports, particularly the systematic simplification of ethnicity, hinder writing the history of migration of diverse ethnic communities worldwide.

Colonizers made decisions about how different races would be enumerated or categorized and decided who belonged and who did not belong in the colonial state register. Though such categorization and governance protocol led to the visibility of major ethnic groups, it could not capture the history of diverse ethnic groups’ mobility. This is the weakness of the colonial categorization of diverse migrant groups. Post-colonial nation-states continued racially or ethnically exclusionary politics, which influenced scholarship, journalism, and popular perceptions. As colonial administrators-cum-scholars had not registered the dynamics of creole and hybrid communities, this thinking continued to influence race relations during the post-

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<sup>32</sup> Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, xii; H. H. Risley and E. A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901, Vol. I, India, Part I, Report* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903), 91. Margaret Allen, “‘Innocents Abroad’ and ‘Prohibited Immigrants’: Australians in India and Indians in Australia 1890-1910,” in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, eds. Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: Australian National University E-Press, 2005), 111-124. For an exploration of the limitations of colonial records and challenges in recovering the history of Bengali migrations, see Gazi Mizanur Rahman, “Transnational History and Colonial Records: Locating Bengali Mobility in the British Malaya,” *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration* 3, no. 2 (2019): 97-112; Gazi Mizanur Rahman, *A Spatial History of Bengali Transnational Community in the Malay World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2024).

<sup>33</sup> *Annals of Indian Administration in the Year 1859-60* (Serampore: Marshall D’cruz, 1860), 369; *Straits Settlements Blue Books*, 1871 (Singapore: Straits Settlements, 1872), 6; *Blue Book for the Year 1888* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1889) 4, 18, 19, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006, revised edition), 166, 168-69.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-70.

colonial eras of newly independent countries. Ethnic categorization in post-colonial states requires explanations from a historical perspective.

Many post-colonial historians follow colonial records and use the umbrella term “Indian,” particularly in studies of South Asian diasporas. For example, “Indian” slave traffic, the functioning of the institution and abolition of slavery, and conditions of Indian indentured and kangany laborers have been substantially explored in the existing literature.<sup>36</sup> Some scholars illustrate the socio-economic conditions of the Indian diasporic community during the colonial and post-colonial eras.<sup>37</sup> Rajesh Rai has examined the Indian diaspora’s changing political ideologies in the colonial context, its encounter with communication technologies, and its transnational religious and political engagement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>38</sup> Arunima Datta interrogates the everyday lives of Indian coolie women in the plantation economies of British Malaya.<sup>39</sup>

Within this broader colonial categorization in South Asian diaspora studies, Sunil Amrith’s work convincingly demonstrates how the missing identity of the Tamils among the Indian migrants can be recovered. Amrith’s work on Tamil experiences in the Malay world has made a pioneering contribution in rescuing a heterogeneous India from a homogenizing colonial past. Amrith’s work has inspired new explorations of other underrepresented cultural, economic and ethnic groups that made up the South Asian diaspora in the Malay world, such as the history of the Sikh community

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<sup>36</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Steven Vertovec, “Indian Indentured Migration to the Caribbean,” in *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, ed. Robin Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 57-63; Richard B. Allen, “Asian Indentured Labor in the 19th and Early 20th Century Colonial Plantation World.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, March 29, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.33> (Accessed April 14, 2021); Carl Vadivella Belle, *Tragic Orphans: Indians in Malaysia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015); David Chanderbali, *Indian Indenture in British Malaya: Policy and Practice in the Straits Settlements* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2008); David Sinjeet Chanderbali, “Indian Indenture in the Straits Settlements, 1872-1910: Policy and Practice in Province Wellesley” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, 1983); John Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore: The Gradual Disappearance of Untouchability 1872-1965* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> S. Nanjundan, *Indians in Malayan Economy* (Delhi: Manager Publications, 1950); Kernial Singh Sandhu, “Indian migration and population change in Malaya, c.100-1957 A.D.: A Historical Geography” (M.A. Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1961); Latiffa Khan, “Indians in Malaya, 1900-1945” (M.A. Dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1963); Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970); Margaret Shennan, *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960* (London: John Murray, 2000); Amarjit Kaur, *Wage Labour in Southeast Asia since 1840: Globalisation, the International Division of Labour and Labour Transformations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Jayati Bhattacharya and Coonoor Kripalani, eds., *Indian and Chinese Immigrant Communities: Comparative Perspectives* (Singapore: ISEAS-Anthem Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore, 1819-1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Arunima Datta, *Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya* (Global South Asians) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

in British Malaya.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with these recent contributions, this article explores the history of Bengali migrants and reveals this specific group of people were better positioned to migrate to the Malay world compared to other South Asian groups.

The heterogeneous identity of South Asian migrants, trans-Asian connectivity, and the problems of colonial archival records presents too simple a picture of the identities of colonial subjects. Non-conventional methodologies can help deal with these ambiguities in colonial records. For example, the diverse identities of Bengali migrants become clearer through a rereading of population census reports and other colonial documents, through locating birthplace and language of migrants, through a close reading of historical events and sources, and through oral history interviews. These approaches are important for achieving a more nuanced historical understanding of migration and of the Bengali ethnic communities in the Straits Settlements.

The most extensive inter-provincial mobility of Bengalis within the British Empire was to Burma, chiefly to the Arakan State. Statistics on migrants' birthplaces provide numerical information about Bengali migrants.<sup>41</sup> The 1901 census counted that 77,771 and 79,263 individuals were registered in Burma; however, they were born in Bengal and Chittagong.<sup>42</sup> The 1931 census of India reported that 257 out of every 10,000 people spoke Bangla in Burma.<sup>43</sup> This implies that some of the Bengali people in Burma migrated further east to the Malay Peninsula by using Thailand as a corridor or overland via the Burma-Malaysia border.

Apart from the categorization of "Indians" in archival records, colonial authorities also used terms such as "adjacent countries," "Asiatic countries," "Asian countries," and "outside India" to denote the origin of South Asian migrants, including Bengalis. Table 2 shows how colonial census reports noted the birthplaces of South Asians in those territories. "Adjacent countries" included the Straits Settlements, Malaya, and present South Asian countries.<sup>44</sup> "Asiatic or Asian countries" meant Asian territories, including the Straits Settlements, Borneo, China, Hong Kong, Java, Sumatra, the Philippines, and Japan.<sup>45</sup> "Outside India" denoted Asian and European countries, including "farther India," which supposedly covered Southeast Asia, including Burma, Malaya, Thailand, and Indochina.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; Arunajeet Kaur, *Sikhs in the policing of British Malaya and Straits Settlements (1874-1957)* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009); Gerard McCann, "Sikhs and the City: Sikh History and Diasporic Practice in Singapore," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 6 (2011): 1465-1498; Isabella Jackson, "The Raj on Nanjing Road: Sikh Policemen in Treaty-Port Shanghai," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 6 (2012): 1672-1704.

<sup>41</sup> Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 98.

<sup>42</sup> C. C. Lowis, *Census of India 1901, Vol. XIII, Burma, Part II, Imperial Tables* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 182, 194.

<sup>43</sup> J. H. Hutton, *Census of India, 1931. Vol. 1, India, Part I, Report* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933), 374.

<sup>44</sup> *Census of the British Empire 1901* (London: Darling & Sons, 1906), 106.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-7; Gait, *Census of 1911, Vol. 1, India, Part II, Tables*, 134.

<sup>46</sup> For details, see Hugh Clifford, *Further India: Burma, Malaya, Siam, and Indo-China* (London: Lawrence and Bullen Ltd., 1904); Risley and Gait, *Census of 1901*, 106.

**Table 2: The number of Bengalis as per Birthplace**

Year of Report	Name of Territories		
	Outside India	Adjacent Countries	Asian Countries
1891	194,155	Not available	
1901	186,468	169,081	3,228
1911	Not available		117,374

**Source:** Adapted from Risley and Gait, *Census of India, 1901*, 102-103; *Census of the British Empire 1901*, 106-7; E. A. Gait, *Census of India 1911*, Vol. 1, India, Part II, Tables (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1913), 134.

A significant number of Bengalis migrated outside British India and Burma and had offspring there. When those children returned to Bengal, they registered their birthplace as “Asian.” For example, Table 2 shows references to various birthplaces of Bengalis, demonstrating their parents’ mobility across Asian territories, including British Malaya. As per the census of 1911, the total population of Bengal and its princely states was 46,305,642.<sup>47</sup> Of this, about 117,374 registered Bengalis had been born in “Asian countries,” including Southeast Asia.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the census reports of the Straits Settlements revealed that many “Indians” had been born outside of the Straits Settlements, but were registered in Singapore, Malacca, and Penang. For example, the Indian residents of Singapore who had been born in Bengal and Madras represented around 9 percent and over 86 percent of the total Indian population there. A little over two percent and over 95 percent of Indians in Malacca had been born in Bengal and Madras, respectively, while in Penang, these were three percent and over 91 percent, respectively.<sup>49</sup>

The Government of British India kept records of migrants who had embarked at government-operated seaports, such as Bombay, Madras, Karachi, and Calcutta. Most of the official statistics of the migrant population covered only British Indian seaports, but this does not mean that all migrants sailed from those ports to the Malay world.<sup>50</sup> They could have migrated via the overland route or embarked at other unregulated ports. For example, though Hena Sinha and A. C. Sinha were Bengalis, they embarked at a Burmese seaport.<sup>51</sup> Despite there not being much information about migration routes and the people who took these routes, this does reveal the contingency of Bengali migration to British Malaya.

<sup>47</sup> Gait, *Census of India 1911*, Vol. 1, India, Part II, Tables, 122-4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 127-128, 134.

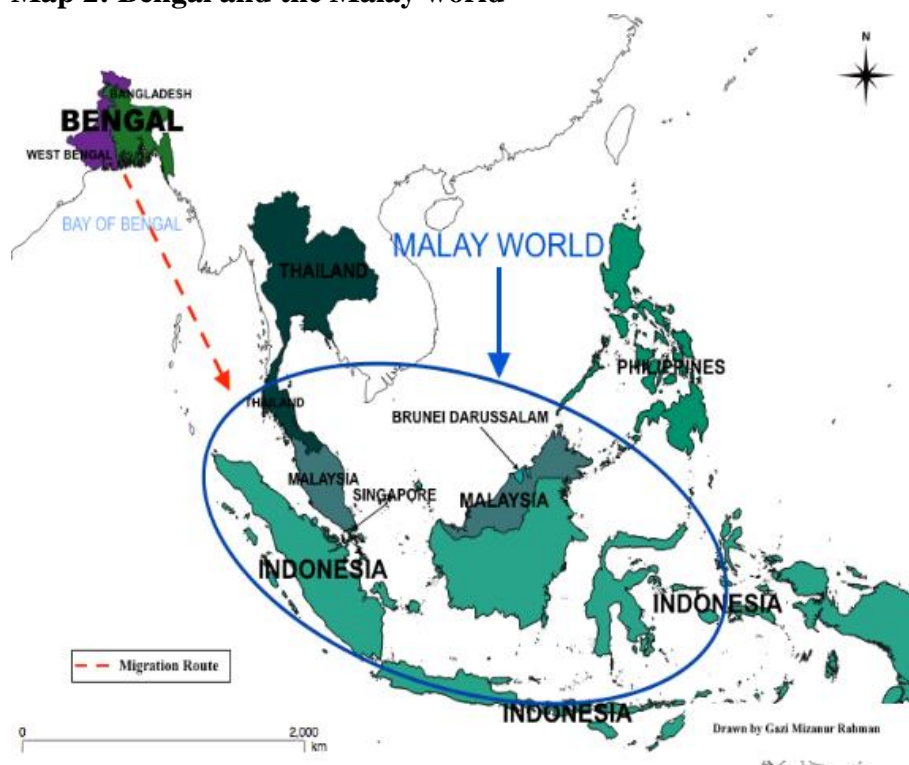
<sup>49</sup> H. Marriott, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements, taken on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1911* (Singapore: Government Print Office, 1911), 72-75.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, *Population of India and Pakistan*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> Mrs. Hena Sinha was born and raised in Burma. After her marriage, A. C. Sinha and Mrs. Sinha, with her mother-in-law, embarked from the port of Rangoon for Singapore. Dr. Sengupta informed us about Bengali doctors and other professionals who came to British Malaya from Burma. National Archives of Singapore, *Oral History Interview*, Hena Sinha, October-November of 1983, Acc. No. 000354.

A revisiting of historical literature can be an alternative way to unearth ethnicity, identity, and experiences of Bengali migrants. This section shows how this can be done by reading between the lines of official publications, newspapers, and sources on community engagement. In 1927, C. O. Blagden suggested that Chersonesus Aurea, or the Malay Peninsula, was primarily populated by the Siamese, Peguans (probably of the Mon ethnicity from Burma), Bengalis, and fishermen from neighboring islands, who went there by boat when the Straits of Malacca had good weather.<sup>52</sup> When the Portuguese launched an expedition to Malacca in 1509, Malays called them “white Bengalis” or “white-skinned Bengalis,”<sup>53</sup> which denotes that the Malay people were familiar with Bengalis well before the arrival of Europeans. In 1510, Malacca had a polyglot population of around 40 or 50 thousand, of whom a thousand were wealthy Gujaratis and three thousand were other Indian merchants, including Parsees, Bengalis, Tamils, and Malayalees.<sup>54</sup>

## Map 2: Bengal and the Malay world



<sup>52</sup> Balthasar Bort, “Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca 1678, trans. [from the Dutch] M. J. Bremner with an introduction and notes by C. O. Blagden,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* V, no. I (1927): 9.

<sup>53</sup> John Leyden (trans.), *Malay Annals*, (London: Longman, Hust, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821), 324; Arnold Wright, ed., *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd’s Greater Britain Publishing Company Ltd., 1908), 86; Ian Lloyd and Wendy Moore, *Malacca* (Singapore: Time Edition, 1986), 28; Sarnia Hayes Hoyt, *Old Malacca* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>54</sup> Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore’s Plural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 41.

The Bengali merchants were well-known during the precolonial era in Malaya and were involved in managing the Malacca port and Map 2 shows how the maritime connection between Bengal and the Malay world made Bengali migration possible. Bengali migration took a new turn with the British expansion across the Bengal delta and Southeast Asia. In 1786, Francis Light brought Bengali farmers from Calcutta to Penang to encourage agricultural enterprise there.<sup>55</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution explains that individuals migrated from Bengal and Calcutta to George Town in Penang in 1788, with diverse occupations such as traders, tailors, gunsmiths, woodmen, fishermen, and *munshi* (religious teachers).<sup>56</sup>

From 1830 to 1851, the British administered Malacca, Penang, and Singapore from Calcutta.<sup>57</sup> This administrative connectivity created opportunities for Bengalis to move to the Straits Settlements. Moreover, the government brought Bengali convicts there for public works.<sup>58</sup> Though the exact numbers of Bengali migrants are available in a limited number of documents, some early colonial records mentioned only Bengalis, without giving the numbers of migrants of other ethnicities. In an 1810 report, the number of Chulias and Bengalis in George Town was over 5,000.<sup>59</sup> In 1844, almost 50,000 inhabitants, including Bengalis, were living in the Province of Wellesley.<sup>60</sup> In 1872, Charles Irving, the Straits Auditor-General, discovered a busy wood and *attap* (traditional housing in the kampungs of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore) township of about 3,000 people of many ethnic groups, including Bengalis.<sup>61</sup> Though these sources do not provide exact figures of Bengali migrants, they corroborate the historical migration of Bengalis.

The recruitment of Bangla-speaking employees at the Singapore Port Office also marks the constant flow of Bengali businesspeople and commodities.<sup>62</sup> When the Oriental Bank of Singapore made the first-ever initiative to issue paper currency in 1849, the notes had writing in four local languages: Chinese, Malay, Bangla, and Tamil, in the denomination of five and one hundred dollars (see Figure 1). The *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Adviser* reported that the notes were more convenient than the silver dollar to the mercantile community.<sup>63</sup> Further information regarding issuing the paper currency could not be traced.

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<sup>55</sup> Francis Light (1740-1794) was a British naval officer and the founder of the British colony in Penang and its capital city in 1786. R. Bonney, "Francis Light and Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, no. 1 (July 1965): 135-158; *Star Online* (hereafter *SO*), 6 March 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957* (Penang: Areca Books, 2014), 49, 56.

<sup>57</sup> *Annals of Indian Administration 1856* (Serampore: Printed by Marshall D'cruz, 1856), 289.

<sup>58</sup> Windsor Earl, *The Eastern Seas, or Voyages and Adventures in the Indian Archipelago in 1832-33-34* (London: W. H. Allen, 1837), 353. Windsor Earl visited Java, Singapore, Borneo and Malaysia during 1832-34, and sometimes he termed Bengal as Eastern India.

<sup>59</sup> Nasution, *Chulia in Penang*, 49, 56.

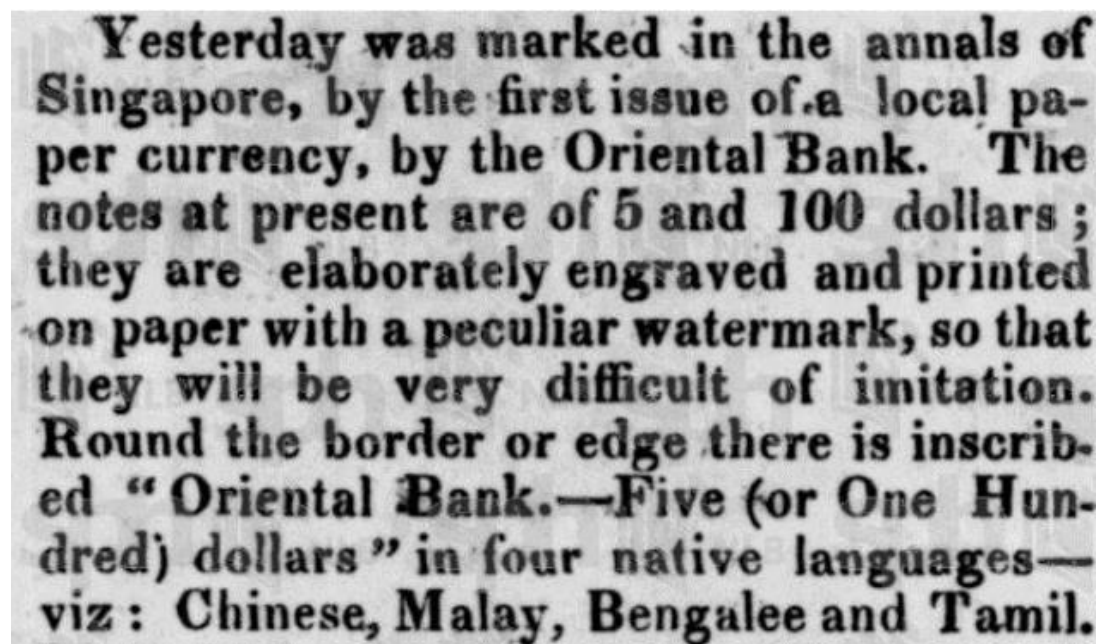
<sup>60</sup> *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (hereafter *SFPMA*), April 25, 1844.

<sup>61</sup> Emily Sadka, *The Protected Malay States 1874-1895* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 28.

<sup>62</sup> *Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register* (hereafter *SCCR*), February 13, 1834, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *SFPMA*, May 10, 1849, 2; Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd., 1908), 244.

**Figure 1: Paper clips of a news report on Oriental Bank**



**Source:** *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 10, 1849, 2.

The demand for Bangla-speaking persons in public offices and academic institutions also suggests the existence of a significant number of Bengali migrants. When the Lord Bishop of Calcutta, Daniel Wilson (1778-1858), visited churches and newly established missionary schools in Malacca in 1834, the schools managing committee showed interest in establishing a Bengali school alongside an English Female School and other local language schools.<sup>64</sup> In 1897, St. Anthony's Boys' School (presently St. Anthony's Primary School, Singapore) advertised for the recruitment of teachers with linguistic skills in various languages, including Bangla.<sup>65</sup> In 1859, the government advised that apart from the Malay language, the aspirants of some government jobs in the Straits Settlements should have proper colloquial knowledge of Hindustani, Tamil, Bengali, or Chinese (see Figure 2). Malay cities were host to various diasporic communities, including Tamil, Chinese, and Bengali, thus establishing a diverse Malay society. These languages were significant for running the British administration since there were many speakers of them, so the government set knowledge of those languages as the *sine qua non* for hiring employees.<sup>66</sup> In 1894, the Kuala Lumpur Court sought to recruit an interpreter who could read and write Bangla and English.<sup>67</sup> In 1895, the Federated Malay States, and in particular the Selangor Police, was also looking to hire a

<sup>64</sup> *SCCR*, October 30, 1834, 2.

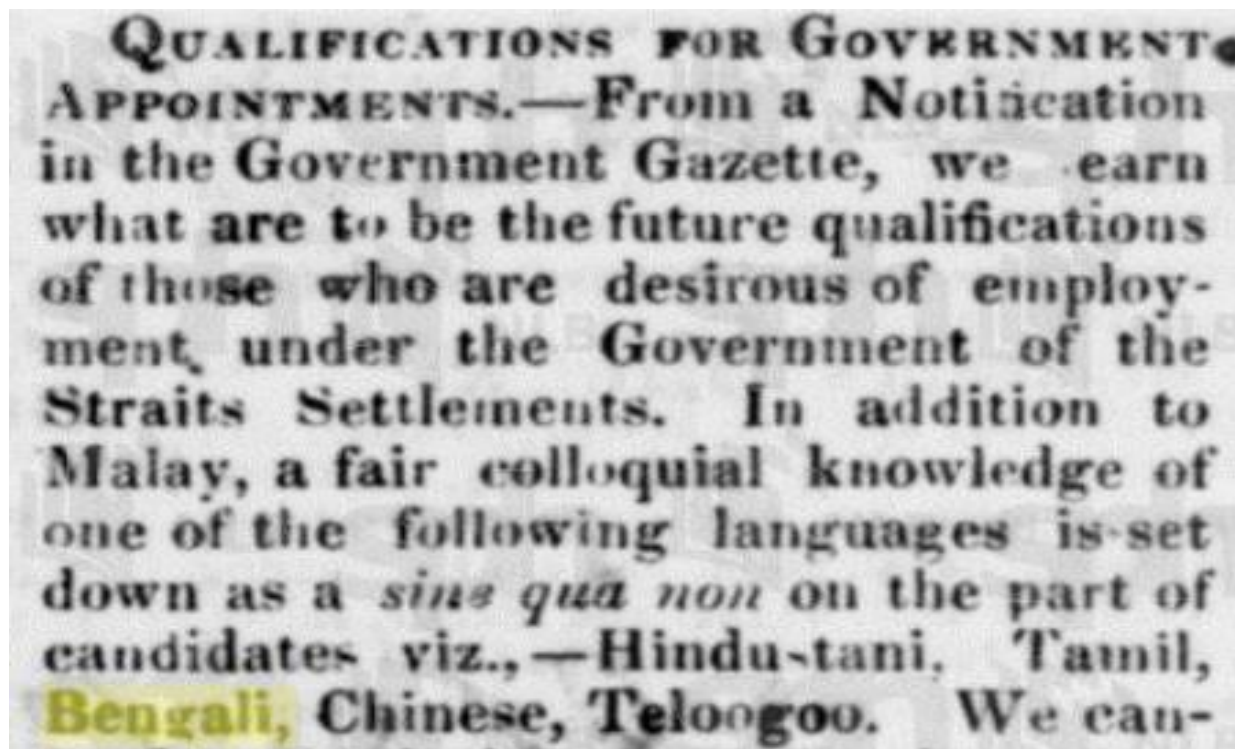
<sup>65</sup> *Mid-Day Herald and Daily*, September 23, 1897.

<sup>66</sup> *Straits Times* (hereinafter *ST*), November 12, 1859.

<sup>67</sup> *ST*, March 13, 1894.

Bengali interpreter.<sup>68</sup> The demand for Bengali interpreters was extensive during the early twentieth century across the Unfederated Malay States, chiefly at Kedah.<sup>69</sup>

**Figure 2: Circulation of Gazette on qualifications of potential candidates**



Source: *Straits Times*, November 12, 1859, 2.

After the Malay and Chinese languages, South Asian languages, particularly Bangla, were given priority for public recruitment at this early stage of British colonial rule in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>70</sup> However, when the number of Tamil laborers started to increase in the 1880s, their language was given preference in public recruitment.<sup>71</sup> This was a reflection of the overall

<sup>68</sup> National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (hereinafter NAM), Public Records and Archives, State Records (hereinafter PRA), “Application from Mr. Gheewala, Bengali Interpreter of Courts for the post of Munshi to Selangor Police Force,” File no. 1957/0054480W, January 17, 1895.

<sup>69</sup> A range of archival records on the need for Bengali interpreters was found in the National Archives of Malaysia. see NAM, PRA, “Request that a Bangalee [Bengali] Interpreter be appointed at Sungai Petani Court,” File no. 1957/0361064W, February 1, 1915; NAM, PRA, “Applies for the Post of Bengali Interpreter,” File no. 1957/0363247W, November 25, 1915.

<sup>70</sup> The Malay language was given importance in every sphere in the 1870s, followed by the Chinese language. See T. N. Harper, “Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12, no. 2, Southeast Asian Diasporas (1997): 268.

<sup>71</sup> Concurrently, Bengalis were enumerated under the head of “Tamils and other Natives of India” in 1891, as mentioned earlier.

decreasing numbers of Bangla speakers: in the 1911 census, the Federated Malay States and Singapore gathered data about ethnicities and dialects and recorded some nineteen Indian languages, including Tamil, Bangla, Hindustani, and Punjabi in the Straits Settlements. Among those, Bangla was spoken by 6, 1.8, and 0.9 percent of the population in Singapore, Malacca, and Penang, respectively, while the percentages of Tamil-speaking people were the highest in the Settlements, representing 76, 88, and 81 percent.<sup>72</sup> As the number of Tamil laborers was increasing in the rubber plantations from the late nineteenth century onward, the number of other South Asian migrants, including the Bangla-speaking people, decreased gradually in the early twentieth century.

The sustained presence of the Bengali community was also reflected in their role in the formation and growth of multi-ethnic organizations. For example, a committee was formed in Singapore in 1916 at 1 Jalan Besar to support the wounded of the British army during the First World War. The Hindustani and Bengali people identified themselves separately in that committee. The President, Vice-President, and Treasurer were Bengali, and the remaining members had migrated from Punjab and United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh).<sup>73</sup>

When Bengali Muslims married Malay women, their inter-racial marriage created transnational families. Habibul Haque Khondker suggested that many Bangla-speaking Muslim migrants who came from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) identified themselves as Malay, learned the local language, and assumed Malay identity through marriage with Malays.<sup>74</sup> The offspring of Bengali-Malay parentage were not registered as Bengali in census reports but as *Jawi Pekan* or *Jawi Peranakan*.<sup>75</sup> There were also Bengali migrants who were indifferent to the question of ethnic identity during birth registration. For instance, some Bengalis who came from East Bengal to Malaya in the early 1920s had their offspring registered as Pakistani in the 1950s, because then

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<sup>72</sup> Marriott, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements*, 66-8.

<sup>73</sup> *SFPMA*, September 16, 1916. The following leaders of the committee were Bengali: President K. Kader Daud bin Abul Odud; Vice-President K. C. Sinha; Secretary Munshi Muhammad Ally; Treasurer Dr. S. N. Bardhan; Member Kobad Ally. The rest were from other regions: Syed Gulabshad (Punjabi); Elahi Bux (United Provinces); Tunda Singh (United Provinces); Hoosen Ally (United Provinces); Ramananda Tewary (United Provinces); Mangal Singh (United Provinces); Mauluvi Singh (United Provinces).

<sup>74</sup> Habibul Haque Khondker, "Bengali-Speaking Families in Singapore: Home, Nation and the World," *International Migration* 46, 4 (2008): 183-85.

<sup>75</sup> In 1858, J. D. Vaughan noted that *Jawi Pekan* referred to the children of Malay mothers and Chinese, Kling, or Bengali fathers. Both the terms *Jawi Pekan* and *Jawi Peranakan* might be used interchangeably; however, upper-class people preferred to use *Jawi Peranakan* rather than *Jawi Pekan*. The term *Jawi Pekan* applies to working-class people. See Kernial Singh Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, eds. Kernial Singh Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 787; Oleh Zuhainy Zulkiffli, "Jawi Peranakan bukan mamak," *myMetro*, April 24, 2015, <https://api.hmetro.com.my/node/46073>; Nasution, *Chulia in Penang*, 8, 121, 125; C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 37; Faridah Abdul Rashid, *Research on the Early Malay Doctors 1900-1957, Malaya and Singapore* (Indiana: Xlibris corporation, 2012), 67.

Bengal was known as East Pakistan.<sup>76</sup> Some still maintain their identities as Pakistani on identification cards even after Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan in 1971.<sup>77</sup>

Oral history provides important clues about ethnic identity and how people perceived their own identity. Many Bengalis also came to Malaya from outside of Bengal. For instance, Dolly Sinha Davenport came from the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) of India. She recalls that her father was an electrical engineer for the government who had transferred from Eastern Bengal to the United Provinces Municipal Board. Her parents' original home had been in Dhaka and Comilla, but she was educated and brought up in the United Provinces. After her marriage, she came to Singapore in 1966. She also described how she met a few Bengali families in Singapore who also migrated from the same province.<sup>78</sup>

Some migrants chose to blur their identities such as Bengali migrants who deterritorialized their ethnic identity through miscegenation, particularly those who migrated during the early nineteenth century. This segment of the Bengali diaspora is ethnically categorized as "Indian" or amalgamated with Malays in census data. For example, one Bangla-speaking migrant, Ismail Ballah (c. 1843-1928), was born in Singapore to parents who had probably arrived in the 1830s. His eldest son SIM Ibrahim became the President of the Bengal Muslim Association in Singapore, and his grandson Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim (1916-1999) pursued a legal career, becoming Singapore's first attorney general.<sup>79</sup> He played a significant role during the merger talks between Singapore and Malaysia in the 1960s, and he was the legal advisor for the Singapore delegation which went to London in 1963 for independence negotiations from British rule.<sup>80</sup> Ismail Ballah's family completed integrated with mainstream Singaporean society, but this deeper integration, led to the misrecognition of the origin of such families. It is unsurprising when Ismail Ballah died a newspaper introduced him as "Arab."<sup>81</sup>

Cross-cultural marriage is a significant reason for greater integration, resulting in multilingualism and layered cultural practices. M. A. Majid, a towering figure in the Bengali diasporic community in the Malay world, migrated to Singapore in the 1920s and married a Chinese woman. He did not teach his offspring the Bangla language, but rather communicated with them in Malay and English. Consequently, his children and grandchildren became fully

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<sup>76</sup> During the Partition of India, 1947, two separate states were created, namely, India and Pakistan. East Bengal (later renamed East Pakistan), presently Bangladesh, was part of Pakistan and remained so until 1971; West Bengal became part of the Indian state.

<sup>77</sup> Anwarul Haque's father migrated from Sylhet to British Malaya, but still, "Pakistani" is written on his identification card. Interview with Anwarul Haque, July 25, 2018, Guild House, NUS, Singapore.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Dolly Sinha Davenport, July 23, 2018, at her house, Singapore.

<sup>79</sup> It should be noted here that Mohamed Ibrahim was very familiar with M. A. Majid, a Bengali migrant. See Haja Maideen, *The Nadra Tragedy: The Maria Hertogh Controversy* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1989), 68.

<sup>80</sup> Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, "Tan Sri Datuk Professor Ahmad Ibrahim," *SingaporeInfopedia*, National Library Board, Singapore, [https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_529\\_2005-01-07.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_529_2005-01-07.html) accessed July 7, 2020; Khoo Kay Kim, "Malay attitudes towards Indians," in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Times Academic Press and ISEAS, 1993), 266-287.

<sup>81</sup> *ST*, July 25, 1928, 10.

integrated with Malay culture. M. A. Majid never returned to Bengal.<sup>82</sup> Another example is the family of Osman Ali, a Bengali migrant. Before his death, Osman Ali requested M. A. Majid to adopt his youngest son, Akbar Ali. M. A. Majid raised Akbar Ali and married him to a local woman in Singapore. Presently, a daughter of Akbar Ali, Balkis Bte Akbar Ali, runs Balkis Family Clinic in Singapore, but she has no connection with Bangladesh. Nirmala Srirekam PuruShotam laments the resulting loss of Bengali heritage through interethnic marriage between Bangla speakers and the speakers of other languages, such as Hindi or Chinese.<sup>83</sup>

The second and subsequent generations of Bengali migrants who grew up in Malaya and Singapore did not learn to speak Bangla fluently; therefore, they used either English or Malay.<sup>84</sup> For example, Hena Sinha commented that her grandchildren rarely spoke Bangla.<sup>85</sup> Ronendra Karmakar recalled that third-generation Bengali migrants who had married people of other ethnicities were not interested in Bangla culture or associations, and neither were their children.<sup>86</sup> Some Bengali migrants who settled in the Malay Peninsula and registered as Malay on their identity cards even adopted Malay or Chinese cultural practices. Ramnath Biswas met a Bengali working at a Chinese newspaper office in Kuala Lumpur, who wore a Malay dress and Chinese wooden shoes. The Bengali migrant informed Ramnath Biswas in the Malay language that they were “Malay” because they had come to Malaya and settled here.<sup>87</sup> There is hardly any reason for listing those who integrated fully into Malay society as Bengali in the government census.

The ethnic identity of the Bengalis began to be more pronounced in the early twentieth century in public consciousness. For instance, according to the census of 1911, the number of emigrants from Bengal to the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States was 3,300 and 3,059, respectively.<sup>88</sup> As geographical categorizations such as “Indian” or “Hindustani” were found to be ambiguous, census workers were instructed to additionally register birthplace and ethnic identity for the 1921 census. With that instruction, the Malay census workers could quickly note if any person from the United Provinces, or a Sikh or a Punjabi, described themselves as a “Bengali.”<sup>89</sup> In the following decades, both the British government officials and the public became aware of the issues with accurately identifying ethnicities; this awareness continued after the

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Shafiya Khatoun, the eldest daughter of Mirza Abdul Majid, August 1, 2018, UBD, Brunei.

<sup>83</sup> Nirmala Srirekam PuruShotam, *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 150.

<sup>84</sup> “Learn Bangla in Singapore,” *Telegraph*, July 21, 2013; Khondker, “Bengali-Speaking Families in Singapore,” 184.

<sup>85</sup> National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Interview, (hereinafter NAS, OHI), Hena Sinha, October 21, 1983, Acc. No. 000354.

<sup>86</sup> NAS, OHI, Ronendra Karmakar, October 18, 1983, Acc. No. 000343.

<sup>87</sup> Ramnath Biswas, *Malaysia Vromon* [Travel to Malaysia] (Calcutta: Prokasok Sattonarayan Bhattacharjjo, 1949), 133.

<sup>88</sup> L. S. S. O’Malley, *Census of India, 1911, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part 1: Report* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1913), 174.

<sup>89</sup> C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya [the colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay states under British protection, namely the federated states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the states of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Brunei: A report on the 1931 census and on certain problems of vital statistics]* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), 83-84.

independence of Malaya and Singapore. Some interviewees of different ethnic community members, including Malayalee, Telugu, Tamil, and Sikh, who had been brought up in Singapore in the early twentieth century, suggested that the Punjabis should not be mixed up with the Bengali.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, some street and place names in Malaysia and Singapore are testimony to early Bengali mobility. Anoma Pieris notes that Argyle Road in Singapore, in the Hokkien dialect, was called *Bangkali Kang* (Bengali Road).<sup>91</sup> Baboo Lane or Hindoo Road in the Serangoon area of Singapore is closely related to the Bengali Hindu Baboo. A Bengali descendant remembers that the area of Norris Road, Lembu Road, Desker Road, Rowell Road, Kinta Road, and Syed Alwi Road in Singapore was sometimes called “Bangla Town” or “Bangla Bazaar.”<sup>92</sup> The name “Bangla Town” or “Bangla Bazaar” can also be found in Malaysia.<sup>93</sup> Kampung Bengali [Bengali village] and Jalan Kampung Bengali [Bengali village road] are located in present-day Penang, Perak, and Pahang, indicating Bengali-concentrated areas. References to these can be found, for example, in archival records between 1930 and 1980, in the context of construction work at Kampung Bengali.<sup>94</sup> In an oral history interview, Gabriel Lourdes remembered that his family lived at Kampung Bengali in Perak during the Japanese Occupation.<sup>95</sup>

The British brought Bengali convicts from Bengkulu to Penang, Malacca, and Singapore in the late eighteenth century.<sup>96</sup> Along with other Indian convicts and indentured laborers, these Bengalis contributed to establishing religious institutions such as mosques and temples in the Straits Settlements. The Bengali Mosque in George Town, presently called Qaryah Masjid Jamek

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<sup>90</sup> NAS, OHI, Sukumara Ittamuittil Menon, May 9, 1985, Acc. No. 000557; Natesan Palanivelu, October 10, 1985, Acc. No. 000588; Soundara Rajan, November 25, 1987, Acc. No. 000845; Seva Singh, April 11, 1984, Acc. No. 000418; Mohinder Singh, June 24, 1985, Acc. No. 000546.

<sup>91</sup> Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes*, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Noorul Islam, July 7, 2018, ANA Book Store, Far East Plaza, Singapore; Interview with AKM Mohsin, July 16, 2018, Rowell Road, Singapore. AKM Mohsin came to Singapore in 1990 and obtained citizenship in 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Nayeem Sultana, “The Dynamics of a Multi-Cultural Society along the Straits of Malacca: Networking and integration of migrant Bangladeshis in Malaysia,” in *The Straits of Malacca: Knowledge and Diversity*, eds. Solvay Gerke, Hans-Dieter Evers, and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008), 149.

<sup>94</sup> NAM, PRA, “Debiting to Town Improvements Vote \$7,000 Being the Estimated Cost of Relief Work at Kampong Bengali,” file no. 1957/0269544W, February 11, 1931; NAM, PRA, “Culvert at Jalan Padang Bengali at Telok Ayer Tawar, Province Wellesley (N),” file no. 1987/0001642P, May 20, 1963; NAM, PRA, “JKK 48/81 Mengambil Alih Untuk Penyelenggaraan Jalan-Jalan dan Parit di atas lot-lot 1113, Jalan KG Bengali, Butterworth,” file no. 1987/0003005P, November 24, 1981.

<sup>95</sup> NAS, OHI, Gabriel Lourdes, November 20, 1984, Acc. No. 000509; He was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1925 and lived in Kampung Bengali during the Japanese Occupation. His parents migrated to Taiping in the 1890s and finally moved to Singapore in 1932.

<sup>96</sup> Gazi Mizanur Rahman, “Colonising the Penal Body: Transit of the Convicts from Bengal to the Malay Peninsula,” *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 23, no. 1 (2023): 3-18; Gazi Mizanur Rahman, “Colonising the Penal Capital: Locating the Bengali Convicts in Cosmopolitan British Malaya,” *Asian Studies, The Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12), ICAS Conference Proceedings 1* (2022): 569-582.

Bengali, was built in 1801 on a piece of land donated by the East India Company.<sup>97</sup> Another Bengali Mosque located at Rajati Medu in Penang was established in 1855.<sup>98</sup> The “Bengali Mosque” (later renamed Bencoolen Mosque) in Singapore was established between 1825 and 1828 at Queen Street<sup>99</sup> and took the name after Bengali migrants. A Bengali descendant named Anwarul Haque recalled:

There was a mosque at Queen Street. The *imam* of the mosque was Bengali. The mosque has been demolished now. It was known as a Bengali mosque. I can remember where the mosque was located. The Bengalis were concentrated at the mosque. In those days, the mosque was a meeting place for the Bengalis. The Majority of the *Musulli* [pious person] were Bengali.<sup>100</sup>

As per Anwarul Haque’s statement, Bengali migrants were concentrated Bengali enclaves like “Bangla Town” or “Bangla Bazaar.” These geographical names substantiated the Bengali migrations and facilitated the location of their ethnic identity.

Transoceanic networks and human mobility took a new turn in the age of exploration and imperialism, resulting in the movement of people from various ethnic groups, willingly or unwillingly, across the world. It is difficult to reconstruct the historical mobility of these migrants for several reasons. Broadly, this article has focused on the methodological and the historiographic hurdles. Archival records are very important to historians for reconstructing history, yet the shortcomings of these records due to colonial and racial bias impede historical study. Colonial authorities might not have been oblivious to ethnic diversity, but it was irrelevant and indeed would have undercut the profit-seeking that characterized colonial activity. Historians need to be aware of categorization problems when collecting data from government records. Historians depend on authorities’ categorizations and frames of reference, but they must not accept these without thoroughly examining and questioning them. Without critically reading government census reports, using these statistics is problematic in writing migration history. Colonizers and census officers registered colonized people using common simplified terms such as “African,” “Latin American,” “Indian,” “alien,” “others,” to name just a few. This oversimplification of ethnic identities has been perpetuated in post-colonial scholarship. Subaltern historians, including Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha, attempt to formulate a new narrative of the history of South Asia in the

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<sup>97</sup> Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects* (Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 244; See also Osman Abdullah Chuah, Abdul Salam M. Shukri, and Mohd Syukri Yeoh, “Indian Muslims in Malaysia: A Sociological Analysis of a Minority Ethnic Group,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2011): 223-225; Nasution, *Chulia in Penang*, 131-32; Later, the mosque was renovated, see NAM, PRA, “Bengali Mosque Leth Street, Penang, 1958,” file no. 2007/0034044W, December 31, 1958.

<sup>98</sup> Nasution, *Chulia in Penang*, XXVIII-XXIX.

<sup>99</sup> Rai, *Indians in Singapore*, 46, 120; Rajesh Rai and A. Mani, (eds.), *Singapore Indian Heritage* (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre, 2017), 293, 298; *ST*, May 14, 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Haque.

1980s, criticizing and rereading colonial records to write the history of peasant movements. They develop a different paradigm for history writing: “history from below” – a historical narrative from the perspective of common people rather than the authorities.

Migration and diaspora are essential areas of global mobility studies, and more needs to be done to reconstruct the specific communities and diverse backgrounds of migrant communities. The homogenization of ethnic diversity that occurs in colonial records hinders historians which is why Searle suggests that historians and statisticians need a policy on priorities, standards of work, and the adaptation of the typical methods of official statistics to colonial conditions.<sup>101</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty has also problematized the colonial idea of “Indians” and argues that the British represented “Indians” through a homogenizing narrative. Through a transnational perspective, Chakrabarty deconstructs the idea of “Indians.”<sup>102</sup> This article has sought to address these categorical challenges and shortcomings in the census reports through the example of Bengali historical migration.

Today, research about ethnicity and identity in Asia are burgeoning areas of historical study. This article has grappled with the ambiguous term “Indian” and shows alternative ways to locate Bengali migrants in historical records. Alternative readings, particularly through revisiting imperial census reports, birthplace information, and early historical sources, and through conducting oral history, can be, despite categorical and terminological ambiguities, used to demonstrate Bengali migration to the Malay world during the British colonial era. These alternate readings also reveal that Bengalis, along with other Indians, played a pivotal role in connecting South and Southeast Asia over the centuries, and that their descendants were integral to the creation of an ethnically diverse Malay society. Applying these alternative historical techniques will be a useful tool for reconstructing the history of other ethnic migrations in the Global South and beyond.

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<sup>101</sup> W. F. Searle, E. J. Phillips, and C. J. Martin, “Colonial Statistics: A Discussion before the Royal Statistical Society Held on March 22nd, 1950, Mr. H. Campion, C.B., Vice-President in the Chair,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 113, no. 3 (1950): 271-298; Gerard L. M. Clauson, “Some Uses of Statistics in Colonial Administration,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* 36, no. 145 (1937): 3-16.

<sup>102</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.