CHAPTER 5 Bengali Harlem

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Bengali Harlem

There are West Indian, low class Mexican, low class Argentinians, low class Peruvians. They also come from East India. All of them, however, when arrested, invariably [say they] are “Porto Rican.” In fact the incoming of these people is responsible for a new racket. . . . We have come across groups lately in Harlem who are selling fake Porto Rican birth certificates for $30 each.

—New York City Police Commissioner Mulrooney, the New York Age, March 9, 1932

If you had visited New York City in the spring of 1949, taken in a Broadway show—say, Death of a Salesman or South Pacific—and then happened to stroll along West Forty-Sixth Street looking to grab a meal at one of the neighborhood’s many and varied restaurants, you may well have been tempted up a flight of stairs at number 144 to try the Indian food at the Bengal Garden. The Bengal Garden was one of a handful of Indian restaurants that had popped up in the theater district in recent years. On entering this small, simple, rectangular space, you would have likely been greeted and seen to your table by a Puerto Rican woman in her midforties. This was Victoria Echevarria Ullah. She ran the front of the restaurant and was stationed near the door. At a far corner table near the back of the restaurant, you may have noticed a well-dressed and distinguished-looking South Asian man, seated as if he were in his office, speaking to one or more other men. He might have been speaking in Bengali or Urdu or English, or switching between the languages, depending on his companions. This was Ibrahim Choudry, one of the owners of the
Bengal Garden, and a founder and officer of multiple community-based organizations, some East Pakistani, some Muslim American, and some interfaith. If you peeked into the back, you would have seen another South Asian man—solidly built, serious, and focused—doing everything from prepping to cooking to plating each dish, moving from one part of the kitchen to the next, sometimes swearing, and making the whole operation work. This was Habib Ullah, the restaurant’s founder and other co-owner, and Victoria’s husband. At the end of each night, after closing, all three headed uptown to go home. Habib and Victoria lived on the second floor of a five-story tenement building on a predominantly Puerto Rican block of East 102nd Street. Ibrahim Choudry had recently moved to a place on the other side of town, a ground-floor apartment on West Ninety-eighth Street, where his neighbors were Puerto Rican and Jewish.

All three came to New York City between 1920 and 1935, and their lives intersected in Harlem. Choudry was likely the first to arrive in the city. He had been a student leader in East Bengal, had come to the attention of British colonial authorities, and had to flee India. He secured a job as a serang on an outgoing steamship, worked as a seafarer for a time, and deserted in New York City. Habib Ullah came to the city around the same time as Choudry. It is unclear how and why he left his village in the district of Noakhali at the age of fourteen, but at that young age he traveled to Calcutta and found a job on an outgoing ship. When his steamer reached the port of Boston, he either jumped ship or fell ill, and his ship continued without him. He could not read or write and barely spoke English, but somehow Habib made his way to New York City, where he lived with other Bengali ex-seamen on the Lower East Side and found work as a dishwasher and line cook. In the 1930s, Habib moved up the Lexington Avenue subway line to East Harlem, where more and more Bengalis were settling—and where he met Victoria. Victoria Echevarria had only recently come to the United States herself, from a neighborhood on the outskirts of San Juan, Puerto Rico. She was the eldest sister in a family of seven children, and when she was nineteen, her father died of a heart attack. Unable to find work in San Juan, Victoria set out on her own for New York City. She lived with some aunts and cousins who had settled in East Harlem, worked in factories, and started sending money
back home. The Bengal Garden was the result of these three individuals’ pooling their expertise. Choudry put together the finances to start the restaurant; Victoria brought skills working with customers and handling the daily accounts; Habib brought his skills as a cook and his experience working in commercial kitchens throughout the city.

Their meeting and partnership grew out of the dynamic arena of migrations, encounters, and crossings that defined Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century. Harlem during this period is best known as the epicenter of the African American world. As thousands of African Americans joined the Great Migration in the opening decades of the twentieth century, New York City became a destination like no other, and Harlem became the neighborhood of all northern black neighborhoods. “To many oppressed within the limitations set up by the South,” wrote Ray Stannard Baker in 1910, “it is indeed the promised land.” But Harlem was not just an end-point for southern migration; it was a destination for immigrants from other parts of the black diasporic world. By the time the first handful of Indian Muslim seamen moved uptown in the mid-1910s, the neighborhood around them was being transformed by thousands of immigrants from the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean: Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Choudry, Ullah, and other ex-seamen from the subcontinent were just a drop amid these larger streams of migrants, but they were one of several such smaller groups quietly settling into the uptown neighborhood, including Argentineans, Colombians, Mexicans, Panamanians, and Chinese.

As promising a place as it seemed, most Harlem residents in the 1910s–1930s struggled to get by. Since the turn of the century, more and more African Americans had moved uptown from other parts of the city in response to recurring waves of violence. By the interwar period, New York city was starkly divided and unequal; Harlem came to be, in the words of contemporary observers, a “city within a city,” a “distinct nation,” a “Negro community . . . with as definite lines of demarcation as if cut by a knife.” The neighborhood’s housing and health conditions were poor, educational opportunities were limited, and the occupational structure of New York City was as segregated as its geography. Men of color were relegated to the city’s lowest-paying jobs as unskilled laborers.
and service workers—porters, elevator operators, dishwashers. Women of color arriving from the South or the Caribbean found an even more limited range of occupations at significantly lower pay; close to three-quarters worked in personal and domestic service, while others labored in garment factories and other light manufacturing or operated boarding houses. Few of these jobs provided a living wage, so households had to pool resources to survive. The economic pressures on Harlem residents grew even more intense during the Depression. It was a context that could readily foster competition and conflict among the neighborhood’s different groups.5

At the same time, as a space of what historian Earl Lewis has termed “overlapping diasporas,” Harlem fostered new forms of identification and new formations of community. The neighborhood’s varied inhabitants shared similar pasts and similar circumstances. They came to Harlem in the wake of antiblack violence in the South and the disruptions of British and U.S. rule in the Caribbean. Within one to two generations, most had moved from rural to urban settings, and all now faced forms of racial power in New York that were in some ways as oppressive as those they left behind. In Harlem, they maintained connections to previous lifeways and foodways and formed groups tied to shared origins: the Sons and Daughters of South Carolina, the West Indian Committee of America, the Club Borinquen.6 But the neighborhood also brought people together across differences. It became a center for some of the era’s strongest articulations of pan-African identity and anti-colonial internationalism, while intermarriage between African Americans and Caribbean immigrants brought members of different groups in contact with one another at the level of the personal, familial, and everyday.7

As they joined the flow into Harlem, South Asian Muslims became an important, if now forgotten, part of New York City and its uptown neighborhood. Many commuted downtown each day, crowded into subway trains with their African American, Puerto Rican, and West Indian neighbors, and worked beside them as doormen, elevator operators, dishwashers, line cooks and factory laborers. Others sold hot dogs from pushcarts along Harlem’s main thoroughfares—Lexington Avenue, 110th Street, 116th Street. A handful saved enough money to open Indian restaurants in different parts of the neighborhood, and a select
few, like Choudry and Ullah, opened establishments in the heart of midtown Manhattan. By the 1940s, members of this population, who were predominantly from the maritime “sending” regions of East Bengal, established their own association, and spaces of daily gathering. But they too shared much in their pasts and present with the other groups around them. In Harlem they became part of a heterogeneous Muslim community that included African Americans and immigrants from Africa and the Middle East. And, as had happened in New Orleans, Baltimore, and Detroit, a smaller number of these ex-seamen married women from their adopted neighborhood, creating, together, a unique if short-lived multiracial community.

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. 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. 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). 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.

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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 7, 1923</td>
<td>John Khan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1803 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Laundry Worker</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carmen Guzman</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1985 2nd Ave.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Porto Rico</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 16, 1923</td>
<td>Mohammed Abdul</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1803 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Laundryman</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sadie Simmonds</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>314 W. 133rd St.</td>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Brookley, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 3, 1925</td>
<td>Muslim Mia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3411/2 W. 4th St.</td>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grace M. Dunbar</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>191 W. 134th St.</td>
<td>Negro</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Elmira, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1, 1925</td>
<td>Rustum Ali</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>202 Broome St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>East India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beatrice Owens</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>202 Broome St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 1925</td>
<td>Abdul Hassan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70 Broome St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Handyman</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethel LeVine</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>70 Broome St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 10, 1926</td>
<td>Solomon Khan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1808 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
<td>Calcutta, India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agnes Weeks</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9 E. 130th St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Barbados, BWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 10, 1926</td>
<td>Nawab Ali</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>222 E. 100th St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>Laundry Man</td>
<td>Calcutta, Br. East Indies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frances Santos</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>317 E. 100th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Porto Rico</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2, 1927</td>
<td>Mokhd Ali</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2971 W. 36th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Chauffer</td>
<td>Bangol, India</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mable Leola Gibson</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36W. 128th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>Seconder Ali</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>69 W. 115th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>Bombay, India</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maria Sedeno</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54 E. 116th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>San Juan, Puerto Rico</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Age 1</td>
<td>Address 1</td>
<td>Race/Profession</td>
<td>Place 1</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>January 7, 1930</td>
<td>Wohad Ali</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>307 E. 100th St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>Laundry Work</td>
<td>India</td>
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<td>Caramath Ali</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1978 2nd Ave.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bell Boy</td>
<td>East India</td>
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<td>Nawab Ali</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>222 E. 98th St.</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Laundry Work</td>
<td>Calcutta, India</td>
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<td>October 3, 1930</td>
<td>Kassim Ullah</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>329 Grand St.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>East India</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Habib Ali</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>90 Orchard St.</td>
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<td>Waiter</td>
<td>Calcutta, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 14, 1934</td>
<td>Nabob Ali</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>57 E. 110th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Calcutta, India</td>
</tr>
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<td>April 24, 1937</td>
<td>Kurban Ali</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>84 W. 115th St.</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Silk Dyeing</td>
<td>India</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 26, 1937</td>
<td>Eleman Miah</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39 W. 112th St.</td>
<td>East Indian</td>
<td>Cook's Helper</td>
<td>Calcutta, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 23, 1937</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>1769 3rd Ave.</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>India</td>
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Proper names and place names are spelled as they appear on the original marriage documents.

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 Miahys 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.  

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.”

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, Abra-
ham, 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. 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. 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.
But restaurants were the most common venture that Indian ex-seamen pursued when they could gather the wherewithal, and by the 1940s and 1950s, several men had opened establishments locally in Harlem as well as in the Theater District in midtown Manhattan. The first Indian restaurant in New York City may have actually started in Harlem; for one year in 1913, the Ceylon India Restaurant—which would later be a center of Indian nationalist activity at its location on Eight Avenue and Forty-Ninth Street in midtown—was listed in the New York City Directory at an address on West 135th Street.22 In 1933, the Harlem Restaurant Owners’ Association had at least one Indian member,23 and between the late 1940s and the late 1950s, advertisements for several Indian restaurants began to appear in the Amsterdam News. A 1946 advertisement—appearing just below an ad for “Club Sudan—formerly known as the internationally famous Cotton Club”—encouraged the News’ readers to “Meet the ‘Curry King’ at India’s Garden Inn,” a restaurant on 121st Street and Manhattan Avenue that served “Delicious East Indian Dishes” alongside “American popular foods—steaks, chops, chicken.”24 In 1950, a small notice appeared amid advertisements for the Apollo Bar, Joe Wells’s Restaurant and Music Bar, and Small’s Paradise, announcing the opening of the Pakistan India Restaurant on Lenox Avenue between 119th and 120th Streets, Kajee and Miah, proprietors, specializing in “East Indian Curry and Rice and American Dishes.”25 When, in 1957, a South Asian immigrant named Eshhad Ali took over proprietorship of the Indo-Pakistan Restaurant at 135th Street and Eighth Avenue, the Amsterdam News ran a feature article, describing it as a “gourmet’s paradise,” explaining the dishes Ali served, and noting that “[he] and his wife, Mamie, live in a modest apartment on 116th Street with their six children, whose ages range from four to thirteen.” The next year, in 1958, Ali opened the Bombay India Restaurant on 125th Street and Amsterdam, an establishment that was in operation in the same location for thirty-five years.26 Other Indian restaurants in Harlem have survived only in collective memory: one restaurant was operating out of a small basement in East Harlem in the mid-1940s; another, possibly named Ameer’s, was on West 127th Street around Seventh or Eighth Avenue in the mid- to late 1960s; Syed Ali’s restaurant was operating on East 109th Street, in the heart of Spanish Harlem, in the mid-1960s to early 1970s.27
These restaurants were important communal spaces for the ex-seamen from the subcontinent who had settled in Harlem. They could come to places like the Pakistan India Restaurant, Amer’s, Eshad Ali’s, or Syed Ali’s to eat familiar food, converse in Bengali or Punjabi, and discuss the events that were unfolding on the subcontinent in the turbulent years that followed Indian independence and the partition of India and East and West Pakistan. Over time, these establishments also became integrated into the daily life of African American and Puerto Rican Harlem. Miriam Christian, a housing activist who came to the neighborhood in the 1950s and initially worked as a columnist for the *Amsterdam News*, recalls that in the mid-1960s, she and her circle—which included other black journalists, artists, organizers, local politicians, and the restaurateur Joe Wells—used to have meetings, functions, and other “special occasions” catered by one of the neighborhood’s Indian restaurants.  

In an interview shortly before his death, the poet and East Harlem resident Sekou Sundiata described his own frequent visits to “Syed Ali’s place” on East 109th Street in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where he remembered offering one of Ali’s sons a sympathetic ear as he struggled with the prospect of taking on his father’s business. Miles Davis patronized Eshad Ali’s Bombay India Restaurant on 125th Street, where according to percussionist James Mtume, he went partly to soak in the sounds of the music the proprietor played. Since these were some of the first halal restaurants in Harlem, they also became spaces where South Asian and African American Muslims met and interacted. Amer’s on 127th Street, for example, became a regular spot for both groups; here, according to stories passed down to Alaudin Ullah, the youngest son of Habib Ullah, immigrant Muslims engaged in discussion and debate with members of Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity about their differing practices and interpretations of Islam.

Those who opened Indian restaurants in midtown Manhattan were aiming for a different clientele. The first to venture into the heart of the city was the Ceylon India Inn. Its proprietor, K. Y. Kira, ran his Ceylon India Hindu Restaurant on Eighth Avenue on the edge of the Tenderloin from roughly 1914 to 1923 and then moved to the center of the theater district, on West 49th Street, just a few blocks uptown from Times Square. The move was precipitated by Kira’s success in drawing
increasingly large numbers of non-Indian customers, starting around the beginning of 1921, an event that created friction with the Indian seamen and students who had previously been able to sit at Kira’s tables for hours at a stretch eating, drinking, and discussing the political situation in India. Although Kira continued to use the Ceylon India Inn on West Forty-Ninth Street for the meetings and functions of expatriate nationalist groups, his move to the center of the Broadway district was clearly driven by business considerations; it was aimed at tapping into a growing desire for Indian food among the more adventurous members of New York’s theatergoing crowd.

Others soon followed Kira’s lead. By the mid-1930s, the Ceylon India Inn was listed among Broadway theaters and restaurants as “New York’s foremost—famous for delicious curries,” but the Longchamps restaurant chain had now opened up a new venture across town on Madison Avenue on the East Side featuring a “magnificent new Indian restaurant” and an “Indian Terrace dining room.” Next, a small number of the more elite Indian immigrants and Indophiles in the city jumped into the fray: Sarat Lahiri, a musician, theater performer, and lecturer from Calcutta, opened the Bengal Tiger Restaurant on West 58th Street; Rustom Wadia, the son of a prosperous Parsi family in Bombay, opened the Raja Restaurant on West 48th Street; and Trudie Teele, an American ex-missionary who had been stationed for fifteen years in Rangoon and Calcutta, hired a cook named Darmadasa and started the East India Curry Shop on East Sixtieth Street. The New York Times food critic Charlotte Hughes declared in 1939: “right now there is a mild scramble for the growing curry trade.”

It was in this context that a handful of Harlem’s Bengali ex-seamen, some of whom had likely worked as cooks on board British steamships, took a chance on opening their own midtown “curry restaurants.” One of the first—and perhaps the most important in terms of its role in the consolidation of the South Asian Muslim community in New York—was the Bengal Garden, the restaurant founded by Habib Ullah, operated by Habib and his wife, Victoria, and backed by Ibrahim Choudry. The Bengal Garden opened in 1948 one block south of the Ceylon India Inn, just above Times Square. Although it was a short-lived venture, the Bengal Garden appears to have owed its success to the front-
of-house / back-of-house division of labor that Habib and Victoria Ullah worked out in the daily operation of the restaurant. The involvement of family members in these businesses would continue to be common; in Harlem, for example, Syed Ali’s sons, who were of Bengali and African American descent, worked in the front of his restaurant, greeting and waiting on customers, and Mamie Ali ran the Bombay India Restaurant for many years after her husband Eshad’s death. This meant that these restaurants were racially and ethnically mixed not just in terms of their clientele, but also in terms of their operation and public face. In the case of the Bengal Garden, the first person that most customers saw when they entered the restaurant was not Bengali but Puerto Rican.

For Habib and Victoria, the Bengal Garden was the culmination of much longer trajectories. According to Victoria’s sister Luz Maria Caballero, Victoria left San Juan at a time when the economic situation in Puerto Rico was bleak, in the mid- to late 1930s, but found the situation in New York almost as difficult, writing back to her family “that the wages were very low and the jobs were very bad in New York, too.” Nevertheless, Victoria found factory work and began sending money back home. Around 1939, Victoria wrote to tell her family she had married Habib. Her sister recalls that she wrote that “she was happy to get married and Habib was a good man” and says that her family was not surprised that she had married a man from India: “there were a lot of Puerto Rican girls marrying Indians.” In the next few years, over the course of the 1940s, Victoria had two children, Habib Jr. and Humaira, helped her younger sister come to join her in New York, went to beautician school, and after the closing of the Bengal Garden opened her own beauty salon in the Bronx. “She was an ambitious person,” says Caballero. The Bronx salon became a new outlet for Victoria’s skills with customers, business operations, and accounting.

It is unclear whether Habib Ullah first learned his kitchen skills as a worker on British steamers, but when his son, Habib Jr., was growing up in Harlem in the mid-1940s, his father had already been working as a line cook in the kitchens of New York restaurants and hotels for “many, many years.” One of Habib Jr.’s early memories is of going to visit his father at the Silver Palm, on Sixth Avenue around Forty-Fourth Street. “It was a diner and the kitchen was downstairs in the basement,” says Ullah Jr. “I went
there as a kid and that was the first time I heard my father curse. When he was working he was saying ‘Goddamn it, what the fuck, get that shit over here,’ you know, he was screaming at people. I don’t know if he was the head cook, but when he was working he was serious. That’s where I first saw him working in a kitchen, but making American food.”

After tiring of working for other people, and most likely at the urging of Victoria, Habib Sr. decided to try his hand at a restaurant of his own. Ullah started up the Bengal Garden with investments from Ibrahim Choudry and from another Bengali ex-seaman, whom Habib Jr. remembers only as “Mr. Ali,” who had saved up $20,000 selling hot dogs from a pushcart on 110th Street.

Despite the developing interest in Indian food among some New Yorkers, Habib and Victoria still had a difficult time making their restaurant work. The interest in curry noted by the New York Times in 1939 may well have waned by the time the Bengal Garden opened. There were also many more Indian restaurants in the Theater District by this time—some run by proprietors with greater resources and more promotional savvy—and Habib and Victoria had two investors to pay back. Habib Ullah Jr. believes that there were still too few Anglo-Americans ready to try Indian food in the late 1940s and early 1950s: “It was a struggle,” he says, “because as good as the Bengal Garden was, back in those days most people didn’t eat ethnic foods as much. ‘You want to eat curry?’ ‘What’s curry?’ ‘No, Indian food, it’s too spicy. It’s too hot.’”

In this sense, the presence of a large Caribbean population in Harlem may have made uptown a better location for Indian restaurants. West Indian establishments had been operating in the neighborhood for years by the 1940s, not only serving the local Caribbean community, but also, over time, familiarizing African Americans and others in Harlem with foods like roti and curry. One of the early Indian restaurants in Harlem was in fact opened by two Caribbean men of Indian descent—Seenandan and Persad. Whatever the reason, Habib Ullah closed his midtown establishment after just one or two years and went back to being a line cook and dishwasher in other restaurants. A few years later Victoria passed away.

However, the knowledge that Habib-Ullah learned and the skills that he gained from his experience of opening and running the Bengal Gar-
den with Victoria now allowed Habib to play a crucial role within Harlem’s Bengali community. In the 1950s and 1960s, Habib Ullah Sr. became the person from whom others in the community sought advice when they wanted to open restaurants of their own. This was the case for Syed Ali, when he opened his restaurant on 109th Street, for Masud Choudhury, when he opened a midtown restaurant in the 1950s, for Nawab Ali, a friend who opened the Kashmir Restaurant on West Forty-Fifth Street in 1960, and for many others:

When a guy like Syed Ali or Nawab Ali wanted to start a restaurant, they would come for Pop and say, “I want to start a restaurant. What do I need to do?” And he knew. He knew where to go and what to do. So, he became a consultant to everybody. It started there. He’d say: “You don’t need a lot of money up front.” He says, “You get all the stuff on concession like your napkins, your silverware, your plates.” He says, “You don’t have to buy that stuff. You go in there and say ‘I’m going to start a restaurant. I need so much of this and that.’” And they’ll give it to you on concession because they know you’ll pay them after a while and they want your business. So that’s what he would [advise them on], and then he would help them set up the menu and certain things, tell them how to cook and whatever.43

Habib Ullah’s experience with the Bengal Garden, in other words, expanded the base of knowledge among the city’s Bengali migrants. Whether he was playing a consulting role out of generosity or to earn a little extra money later in his life when asthma forced him to scrape by on disability and Social Security, Ullah’s advice enabled other ex-seamen to follow in his and Victoria’s footsteps and ultimately operate more successful ventures than his own.

The Kashmir Restaurant, for example, which Nawab Ali operated with his son “Butch” working in the kitchen, ran successfully through the late 1950s and 1960s, until Ali decided to retire and return to his village in the newly created nation of Bangladesh in the early 1970s. The Kashmir benefitted from its location a few doors down from what was, in the early 1960s, one of Manhattan’s most popular music and dance venues, the Peppermint Lounge—home of go-go dancing and the
“Peppermint Twist”—which provided the Indian restaurant with a young, nighttime clientele. Even in its midtown location, however, the Kashmir remained, in part, a community space for other Bengalis. According to Habib Ullah Jr., Nawab Ali, like Ibrahim Choudry before him, saved a special table in the back corner of his restaurant where he served food to, and sat and talked with, Habib Sr. and others in his community whenever they dropped by. Ullah Jr. again emphasizes, however, that even a “successful” restaurant like the Kashmir did not make Nawab Ali a wealthy man, nor does he think this was ultimately the goal of those of his father’s friends who took this route: “These guys weren’t driving around in Cadillacs,” Ullah Jr. says. “They were still living normal lives. I think starting their own business was their way of gaining some independence. They weren’t looking to become rich.”

The Middleman

Like Dada Amir Haider Khan, Ibrahim Choudry went through a political transformation after coming to New York. The fact that he eventually Anglicized his name to Abraham in order to better suit his surroundings is emblematic of this transformation. His was not so much a politicization as a change in the focus and terrain of his organizing work. While Khan became a committed Indian nationalist during his years after jumping ship in the United States and then returned to the subcontinent to fulfill his political calling in the context of the independence movement there, Choudry left the independence movement early on and, after deserting his ship and settling in the United States, redirected his political energies to the task of building and consolidating a local South Asian Muslim community in New York City.

According to Choudry’s brother Masud, young Ibrahim first became involved in politics in the early 1920s as a student in East Bengal. Like thousands of Indian Muslim men of his generation, he joined the Khilafat Movement, a Pan-Islamic, anti-imperialist agitation that arose after the British government refused to restore the Turkish Caliph to his throne after the conclusion of World War I. Although the Khilafat Movement was originally focused on the effort to force the British to follow through on this promise, it also became a conduit for the entry of many
young Muslims into the Indian independence movement. This was particularly the case after Mohandas Gandhi sought to bring Khilafat and Indian National Congress leaders into common cause.\textsuperscript{45} It is unclear where Ibrahim Choudry fit within these dynamics, and the specifics of his student political work in the early 1920s remain unknown. Like Saindranath Ghose, however, Choudry ultimately became a wanted man and had to flee British colonial authorities via the merchant marine. Choudry, however, was not from the Calcutta elite—he came from a village in the district of Sylhet—so when he boarded a ship heading west, he did so not “disguised” as a seaman, but working as one. According to his brother, Ibrahim was working as a crew manager, or \textit{serang}.\textsuperscript{46}

In 1949, when Choudry applied for U.S. citizenship in the wake of the Indian naturalization bill that had passed Congress three years before, he submitted a Certificate of Arrival that stated he had arrived in the United States via the port of New York on the City Line ship the \textit{SS City of Lahore}, on March 15, 1923.\textsuperscript{47} There is no record, however, of the \textit{City of Lahore} or any other City Line ship arriving in New York on March 15, 1923, nor did the \textit{City of Lahore} arrive on March 15 of any other year in the 1920s. The ship did drop anchor in New York once in 1923, on August 27, but a note on its manifest declares that all its Indian crew were held on board and it left port without desertions. It is unclear, therefore, when exactly Choudry arrived in New York and how, many years later, he obtained from officials in the Immigration and Naturalization Office a signed Certificate of Arrival. By all accounts, Ibrahim Choudry did come to New York City in the early 1920s. It is unknown where he lived initially and what he did for work, but by the late 1930s, Choudry was already working among his countrymen uptown and on the Lower East Side, and in 1938, at the age of thirty-two, he married a young woman from Harlem, Catherine Aguilera. Catherine was seventeen years old and was also a recent immigrant to New York. She was born in Cuba to Puerto Rican parents who had moved to Guantánamo Bay after her father found work on the U.S. military base there. The family had then moved to East Harlem in 1936. Ibrahim and Catherine had two children, a daughter, Laily, in 1939, and a son, Noor, in 1942.\textsuperscript{48}

It was around this time that Ibrahim Choudry embarked on his first large-scale community-building project. During the Second World War,
the British government opened a series of clubs for British merchant sailors in Allied ports all over the world in an effort to keep up morale among the tens of thousands of seamen upon whom the war effort depended for the delivery of food, munitions, and supplies. Quarterly reports show that white British seamen regularly made use of these clubs, where they could engage in recreation of various kinds, but that the sizable population of Indian seamen working on British ships rarely set foot inside one of these clubs—not surprising given the racial dynamics of British maritime labor. Two years after most of the British Merchant Navy Clubs—including one in New York City, on South Street—had already been established, Choudry appears to have been the main force behind convincing the British consul general in New York to open a separate club specifically for Indian seamen—the only one of its kind established for Indian workers throughout the entire global network of British Merchant Navy Clubs. Choudry became the first manager of the club, which occupied the two upper floors of a four-story building at 100 West Thirty-Eighth Street. The British Merchant Sailors’ Club for Indian Seamen included a small prayer room, a recreation room, and a mess hall that seated eighty people, where visiting seamen could get fresh Indian meals, served three times a day by a staff cook, Secunder Meah. According to the club’s records, its prayer room was equipped with “25 copies of Mohammedan Koran presented to Club by Viceroy of India’s Special Purposes Fund.” The recreation room had a “Film projector, Radio, Piano, Gramophone, Indian String Instruments, Chess, Checkers and Draughts . . . 6 tables, free note paper . . . [and] Indian papers and magazines.”

The records of the Indian Seamen’s Club give us a sense of both the sheer number of Indian maritime workers going in and out of New York by the 1940s and the range of work that Ibrahim Choudry was doing among this population via the club. Within months of its opening, the British Merchant Navy Club for Indian Seamen in midtown Manhattan became the most visited of all the British Merchant Navy Clubs in the United States. By the end of its first year, the club had had 66,221 visits by Indian seamen and had served 198,200 meals. This enthusiastic reaction to the club was in part a sign of Choudry’s foresight in recognizing a need and his skill in convincing British authorities to fill
it, but it was also a result of his tireless work once the club opened. Choudry regularly went out to the docks all around the Manhattan and Brooklyn waterfronts to meet with incoming Indian crews and bring them in groups by city bus to the midtown club. He oversaw weekly prayer meetings, “special parties . . . on Mohammedan festivals . . . general recitations and songs, with drum accompaniment on Saturdays [with] local residents participating . . . [and f]ilm shows three nights a week;” arranged “[e]xcursions . . . to the Bronx Zoo and Coney Island,” procured complimentary tickets to the theater, and ran “bi-weekly English lessons.” Choudry also took dictation in his office from nonliterate seamen who wanted to send letters back home and arranged visits for incoming sailors “to [the] homes of local Indian residents.” Beyond the specifics of Choudry’s work, what is striking about the records of the British Merchant Navy Club for Indian Seamen is the acknowledgment that, by 1944, there was both a large Indian seafaring population and a smaller “resident” Indian population in New York City, of which men like Secunder Meah and the others listed as employees of the club— Sekunder Yassim, Salim Darwood, Wahed Ali—were all a part, and among whom Ibrahim Choudry was already clearly a leader.

During its short life span, the Bengal Garden also became an important space for the consolidation of New York’s Bengali Muslim—or, after 1947, “East Pakistani”—community. This was in part because of Ibrahim Choudry’s involvement in the restaurant and his use of the space for a range of different meetings and events. In the latter half of the 1940s, after his experience of running the Indian Seamen’s Club on West Thirty-Eighth Street, Choudry became increasingly involved in building connections among the many ex-seamen who had settled in Harlem, elsewhere in New York, and across the river in New Jersey, as well as between this community and others in the city—particularly other Muslims. According to his son, Noor, Choudry was consumed by such work, which ranged from keeping a small spare room in his apartment for men who had just arrived in the city or had no place to stay, to helping ex-seamen with immigration problems, leading religious functions, and interfacing on his community’s behalf with British, Indian, and Pakistani consular officials. Choudry even went from one New York–area hospital to the next, meeting with staff and asking them to call him whenever
anyone was admitted to their care with the surnames Meah, Ullah, Ud- 

din, or Ali. For many in the community, recalls Noor Choudry, his fa-
ther “was the guy to call when there was a problem. That particular 
group,” he continues, “was very, very tight, and if they called and they 
needed something, my dad was boom, gone. He would say: ‘Son, there’s 
a can of soup in the cupboard—I gotta go.’”

Choudry was involved in a wide range of organizational and 
institution-building activities, in both Harlem and the larger city. He 
undertook most of this work under the aegis, or as a representative, of an 
organization he cofounded with Habib Ullah and others around 1947, 
the Pakistan League of America. In 1944, when Choudry was running 
the Indian Seamen’s Club on West Thirty-Eighth Street, he became in-
volved with the India Association for American Citizenship, an or ga ni-
za tion that worked with Mubarek Ali Khan’s Indian Benevolent Associa-
tion to lobby Congress to grant citizenship rights to thousands of 
Indian workers and farmers who had settled in the United States in the 
1910s and 1920s. In this eff  ort, Choudry was allied against J. J. Singh 
and his India League of America, and when he wrote in his statement 
for the 1945 congressional hearings on Indian naturalization, “I am not 
speaking for the transient element—the student the business man, the 
lecturer . . . whose interests and ties in this country are temporary,” it 
was likely as much a criticism of Singh and his more elite or ga ni-
za tion as it was a statement of Choudry’s own position. There also appears to be 
an air of defi ance in Choudry’s decision to start an organization, in dis-
tinction from J. J. Singh’s India League of America, and call it the “Paki-
stan League of America.” While the temptation may be to see the split 
between these two organizations in terms of nation and religion, espe-
cially at the moment that the sectarian violence of Partition was raging 
on the subcontinent, the most signifi cant division between the groups 
they represented in the United States may in fact have been class. This is 
reflected in the New York Times’ reporting on the fi rst-anniversary inde-
pendence celebrations of the two leagues in August 1948: the India 
League received the bulk of the Times’ attention for their gala at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, which featured a speech by J. J. Singh and “a short 
program of Indian ceremonial and temple dances in Oriental costumes,” 
while the Pakistan League’s parallel celebration at their clubhouse on
the Lower East Side was given only brief mention. Ibrahim Choudry’s complaint against “rich people from our nation who live in America” at a dinner for the East Bengali labor leader Aftab Ali a month earlier also appears to have been directed at J. J. Singh and the members of his league.57

This is not to say that the Pakistan League was formed merely in reaction to the more elite India League. The energy that Choudry had once put into the Indian Seamen’s Club he now directed toward his work with the Pakistan League. By 1948, the league had a core membership of about 100–150 men—mostly, it appears, ex-seamen from East Bengali areas like Sylhet, Noakhali, and Chittagong who had become “East Pakistani” in absentia when the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947. The organization maintained an office on Eldridge and later Clinton Street, which, according to Habib Ullah Jr., doubled as its “clubhouse”—modeled, no doubt, on the Italian and Puerto Rican social clubs in the same neighborhood. The Bengal Garden restaurant became the primary location for the league’s public events. This included a series of dinners between 1949 and 1951 honoring William Langer, the North Dakota senator who introduced the bill seeking citizenship rights for pre-1924 Indian migrants and then fought for its passage for seven years. These events, held on dates including Lincoln’s and Washington’s birthdays, featured speeches by Langer, Choudry, and other guests—Mubarek Ali Khan, Henry Tudor Mason, Hans Stefan Santesson—who had been involved with pushing the Langer bills in the 1939–1945 period. They were now part of an effort to get Senator Langer to introduce legislation opening up an immigration quota for the new state of Pakistan and granting naturalization rights to Pakistanis who had resided in the United States for four years or more. This effort was successful: Mubarek Ali Khan was the chief guest at a fourth dinner in 1951, at which he reported on Langer’s introduction of the bill. In the mid-1940s, J. J. Singh had lobbied congressmen by wining and dining them in rooms he had taken in fancy Washington hotels. Now the Pakistan League was lobbying Langer by inviting him to the Bengal Garden, flattering him with Ibrahim Choudry’s speeches and plying him with Habib Ullah’s curry.58

It is significant that the activities of the Pakistan League of America—and of Ibrahim Choudry in particular—were reported as often in the
pages of the *New York Amsterdam News* as in those of the *New York Times*. In addition to the fact that many of the Pakistan League’s members were now longtime residents of Harlem—the *Amsterdam News*’ home—Choudry cultivated relationships with the *News*, with Harlem’s African American Muslim communities, and with a range of other communities and individuals throughout the neighborhood and the rest of the city. At one of the Bengal Garden’s dinners honoring Senator Langer, “Mrs. Gerri Major of the *New York Amsterdam News*” was one of the invited guests, alongside the senator, as was the Italian American president of “local 325, Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Alliance,” a local that, by this time, likely included a number of Bengali workers among its ranks.59

In August 1950, the Pakistan League cosponsored a banquet in Harlem that brought together a number of African American and immigrant Muslim associations—under the banner of the “Inter-Muslim Societies Committee”—to honor the arrival in New York of visiting Sufi Muslim missionary Maulana Mohammad Abdul Aleem Siddique, of Meerut, India. The dinner took place in the heart of the neighborhood, one block west of the Apollo Theater, at the offices of the International Muslim Society, an organization founded by two members of the Moorish Science movement, Dr. Abdul Wadud Beg and Dr. Rizkah Bey.60 Choudry was one of the featured speakers at the banquet, whose attendees included immigrant Muslims from South Asia and the Caribbean, African American Muslims from Harlem, consular officials from Egypt, Iraq, and Yemen, and a prince of Kuwait.61 One of the other sponsoring groups was the Muslim Brotherhood, USA, an organization cofounded by Talib Dawud, an African American Muslim with roots in the Ahmadiyya movement. Dawud was a well-known Harlem musician; he was a member of Dizzy Gillespie’s band and husband of the vocalist Dakota Staton.62

In 1950–1951, Ibrahim Choudry’s cousin took over the presidency of the Pakistan League.63 While Choudry himself continued to play a central role in the organization, eventually coming back to the presidency later in the 1950s, he devoted increasing time to two causes that kept him in constant contact with a broader array of New York’s Muslims as well as with leaders of other faiths. The first was his campaign to build a mosque in New York City, an effort that followed directly on Maulana
Siddique’s call, during his 1950 visit, for “the Moslems of the United States to unite and pool their efforts to build a united organization and a mosque.” Choudry took to this challenge with great energy, building ties among different Muslim leaders throughout the city and initiating and coordinating a long-term fund-raising drive. Choudry even publicly called on Rita Hayworth, the Brooklyn-born Hollywood starlet, to pledge money for the construction of a New York mosque after her 1949 marriage to Prince Ali Aga Khan, then a representative of Pakistan in the United Nations General Assembly.

When Choudry was reelected president of the Pakistan League in the mid-1950s, he joined a series of interfaith initiatives connected to New York’s Presbyterian Labor Temple on the Lower East Side: in 1956–1957, he was a member of the Interfaith Committee for Peace in the Holy Land, which organized interracial, interfaith services in New York, petitioned the United Nations to strengthen their Middle East peace efforts, and sent delegations of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders on philanthropic missions to the region; and in April 1960, Choudry was part of the Labor Temple’s All Faith Task Force, which sent an open letter to Virginia governor J. Lindsay Almond condemning the jailing of two African American ministers who had challenged the whites-only policy of Petersburg Public Library. Choudry and the other members of the task force condemned the violation of “Negro citizens . . . rights of free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion, as well as equal protection under the law.” In 1958, Choudry drew upon his relationship with the Labor Temple and teamed up with two prominent African American Muslim leaders—Shaykh Daoud Ahmed Faisal, the founder and longtime leader of the Sunni group the Islamic Mission of America, and Ibrahim Guled of the International Muslim Society—to open the Muslim Children’s Workshop, a center for the religious education of American-born Muslim youth, at the Temple’s East Fourteenth Street address.

Choudry’s efforts at community building were emblematic of the transformation that New York’s escaped South Asian seamen were undergoing as they became more rooted in Harlem and other parts of the city during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. If they began their lives uptown as a small group of outsiders amid the much larger history-making
migrations into Harlem, by midcentury they were deeply ingrained in the physical and social landscape of the neighborhood, in its cultural and institutional life, and in the cultural and institutional life of the city as a whole. They achieved this not by creating a closed enclave of their own but rather by living in an expanding set of concentric circles of identification and association. Like Harlem’s migrants from Virginia, South Carolina, Barbados, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere, they formed their own ethnic organizations, within which they could speak a common language, draw on common pasts, share in their new challenges and experiences, maintain cultural and religious practices, and collectively pursue political goals, like the repeal of anti-Asian immigration and naturalization laws. But these organizations existed within a larger multiethnic context, and in their daily lives, these men were constantly stretching beyond the boundaries of “their own” ethnicity, language, and religion. The majority of New York’s working-class South Asian Muslim population did not have the kind of public life that Ibrahim Choudry did; these men experienced the cross-racial and the interethnic at the level of the personal and the everyday—on their uptown streets, in their apartment buildings, and in their families.