ECHOES
OF BANGLADESH

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written by

Maisa Mubashira Mahi

RESEARCH METHOD STATEMENT

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A Journey of Belonging and the Remaking of Home in Whitechapel

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Maisa Mubashira Mahi

Supervisor: Caroline Rabourdin

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ARCT1060 - Architectural Thesis
MArch Architecture - Part 2
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UNIVERSITY OF GREENWHICH

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RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

● আমার বিষয় কি? দর্শক কারা?

(Amar bishoy ki? Dorshok kara?

- What's my topic? Who's the audience?)

My research explores **how the Bangladeshi community has reshaped Whitechapel and Brick Lane**, transforming these areas into spaces of cultural expression, resilience, and reclamation. Through a postcolonial lens, it examines how migration influences urban identity, interrogating whether the visible presence of Bangladeshis in Whitechapel represents a form of spatial reclamation or a more complex negotiation of identity and belonging.

The intended audience includes **academics, urban planners, architects**, and **students** interested in migration, postcolonial urbanism and cultural studies. It also speaks to the general public, especially those curious about the history of the Bangladeshi community in London.

● এই বিষয় কেন?

(Ei bishoy keno?

- Why this topic?)

This research is both personal and academic. Born in Bangladesh, I spent most of my life in Italy before moving to the UK. When I arrived in London, I discovered a vibrant Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel and Brick Lane: places where the language, food, and cultural practices I had grown distant from were not only alive but thriving. This experience is what prompted a deeper exploration of how migration shapes space, and how space, in turn, shapes identity.

This is **a journey of rediscovery that allows me to reconnect with my heritage** while critically analysing the spatial, historical, and architectural processes that have shaped Whitechapel into a centre of Bangladeshi identity.

● আমার চিন্তার প্রক্রিয়া কি?

(Amar chintar prokriya ki?
- What is my thought process?)

The structure of my research is influenced by **movement through space**: walking through Whitechapel, tracing historical changes and mapping them over time. The streets, buildings, parks and institutions of Whitechapel and Brick Lane act as **narrative anchors**, that have allowed me to explore the past, present and possible future of these spaces.

I want **to understand** how these places reflect the resilience of the Bangladeshi community, and how these spaces have come to **tell their story** of

● আমার প্রধান গবেষণার প্রশ্ন কি?

(Amar prodhan gobeshonar proshno ki?
-. What are my main research questions?)

- How has the Bangladeshi community shaped Whitechapel and Brick Lane to reflect their cultural identity, and what does this say about the postcolonial experience in London?

- Is this transformation a form of spatial reclamation or is it something more complex? Does it challenge or reinforce existing power structures within the urban landscape?

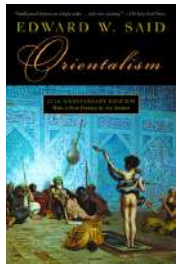
- What role does architecture play in the negotiation of cultural identity and visibility within Whitechapel and Brick Lane?

● কোন তত্ত্বগুলি আমার গবেষণার ভিত্তি গঠন করে?

(Kon totthoguli amar gobeshonar bhitti gothon kore?
- Which theories inform the foundation of my study?)

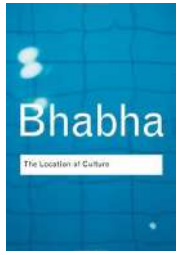
To answer my questions I will be **drawing upon postcolonial theories** of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha which provide a critical foundation for understanding the spatial and cultural transformations within Whitechapel and Brick Lane.

1. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) examines how the West has historically represented and objectified the East, constructing narratives that reinforce power imbalances. Said argues that colonial discourse created the "Orient" as an exoticised, passive counterpart to the West: an idea that continues to shape perceptions of migrant communities.



In the context of my thesis, Said's work helps unpack how Bangladeshis in Whitechapel negotiate their visibility within a city that was once the heart of British imperial power.

2. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces key concepts such as "*hybridity*", "*mimicry*", and "*third space*", which are fundamental to understanding how migrant communities construct identity in postcolonial contexts. Hybridity refers to the blending of cultural influences, resisting binary categories of "coloniser" and "colonised".



Third space is particularly relevant to my research, as it highlights how spaces like Whitechapel and Brick Lane become sites of cultural negotiation, where migrants reconfigure their surroundings while navigating dominant power structures.

● আমার লক্ষ্য এবং উদ্দেশ্য কি?

(*Amar lokkho ebong uddessho ki?*

- What are my aims and objectives?)

- Investigate how the Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel has reshaped the area's identity.
- Examine whether this transformation represents a form of spatial reclamation or a more complex negotiation of power.
- Contribute to broader discussions on migration, cultural identity, and postcolonial urbanism.
- Provide an architectural analysis of how spaces of migration function as sites of identity formation.

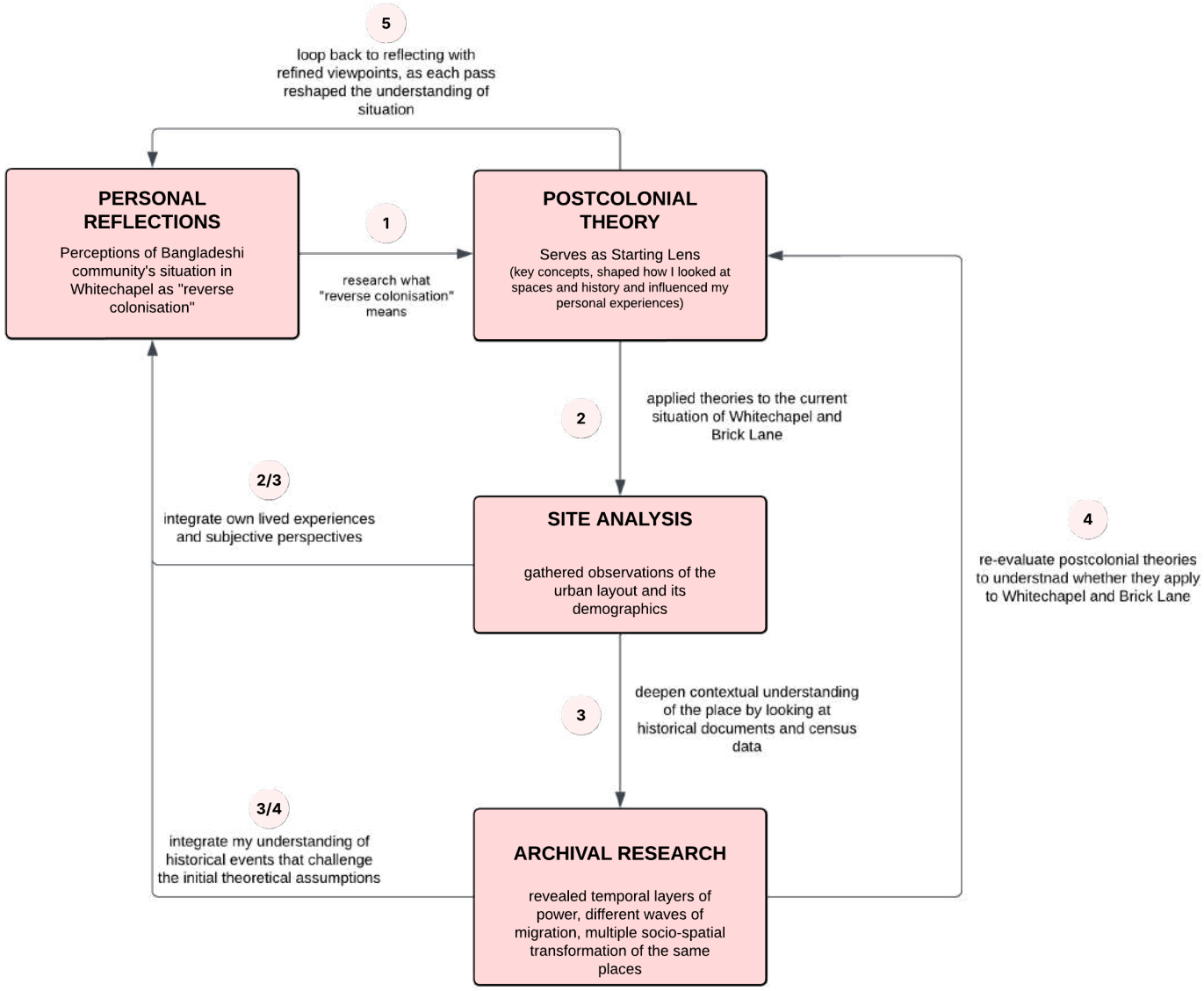
● আমার পদ্ধতি কি?

(*Amar poddhoti ki?*

- What's my approach?)

This research follows an **interdisciplinary methodology,** along with theoretical analysis I will be conducting:

- ARCHIVAL RESEARCH
- ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN ANALYSIS
- SITE OBSERVATIONS
- NOTES OF PERSONAL REFLECTIONS


5
loop back to reflecting with refined viewpoints, as each pass reshaped the understanding of situation
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS
Perceptions of Bangladeshi community's situation in Whitechapel as "reverse colonisation"
1
research what "reverse colonisation" means
POSTCOLONIAL THEORY
Serves as Starting Lens
(key concepts, shaped how I looked at spaces and history and influenced my personal experiences)
2
applied theories to the current situation of Whitechapel and Brick Lane
2/3
integrate own lived experiences and subjective perspectives
SITE ANALYSIS
gathered observations of the urban layout and its demographics
4
re-evaluate postcolonial theories to understnad whether they apply to Whitechapel and Brick Lane
3
deepen contextual understanding of the place by looking at historical documents and census data
3/4
integrate my understanding of historical events that challenge the initial theoretical assumptions
ARCHIVAL RESEARCH
revealed temporal layers of power, different waves of migration, multiple socio-spatial transformation of the same places

আমার লেখার ধরন কি? কেন?

(Amar lekhar dhoron ki? Keno?
- What's my writing style? Why?)

My writing is intentionally **clear, accessible and reflective.** I chose to use a **first-person perspective**, to engage readers in my journey, making complex theories more approachable. The style is a blend of academic rigour and personal reflections, ensuring that my research remains both critical and deeply personal.

I incorporate passages written in **Bangla,** that are followed by translation, that are essential reflection that deepen my engagement with the themes I explore.

This choice mirrors the linguistic and cultural layering of Whitechapel itself, where bangla is as present in the streetscape as it is in the identities of those who inhabit it.

I've chosen to use the **color red** throughout my thesis because it has strong meaning in Bengali culture.

Red symbolizes the bloodshed during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War and stands for strength, pride, and unity. It's a way to tie my heritage to the transformation of the community.

আমার গবেষণার গঠন কীভাবে সাজানো?

(Amar gobeshona kemon kore shajano?
- How is my thesis structured?)

- **Chapter 1 – Roots and routes**
  lays the historical and theoretical foundation, tracing the migration of Bangladeshis to the UK and positioning it within the legacies of colonialism and postcolonial displacement.

- **Chapter 2 – Urban Canvas**
  explores how the Bangladeshi community has reshaped Whitechapel and Brick Lane, transforming their urban landscape through architecture, commerce, and cultural expression.

- **Chapter 3 – Cultural Resonance**
  shifts focus to the tensions between cultural visibility and erasure, interrogating how processes like gentrification and commodification threaten these migrant spaces.

- **Chapter 4 – Theoretical Reflections**
  brings these discussions together, critically reflecting on the dynamics of belonging, power, and spatial reclamation.

Each chapter builds on the last, forming a narrative that moves between past and present, history and lived experience.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & SOURCES

● নৈতিকতার বিষয়

(*Noytikotar bishoy*
- About ethics)

In terms of ethics, I have ensured that all data used in this research is properly credited. I have also made sure that the interviews that I am going to include, even though they're publicly available, are in line with ethical guidelines, respecting privacy and consent.

The information I use from the Swadhinata Trust, TH Council and other online sources will be cited accurately.

● আমার প্রধান তথ্য সম্পদ কি?

(*Amar prodhan tottho shompod ki?*
- What are my primary information sources?)

- Archival materials from Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives
- Swadhinata Trust, a London-based organization dedicated to documenting the history of Bangladeshis in the UK, have played a crucial role in preserving oral histories, archival photographs, and community narratives.

By using these sources, I ensure that my research is both historically grounded and experientially informed

● গ্রন্থপঞ্জি

(*Gronthoponji* - **Bibliography**)

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to Mifyaz and Mihraz,

this work is for you, so that you always carry a deep love for where we come from and the stories that connect us

-maa

PREFACE

This thesis is not just an academic project, it's a deeply personal journey.

Born in Bangladesh, I spent most of my life far from my homeland and distant from my culture, growing up in Italy for 21 years before moving to the UK. When I arrived in London in 2020, I discovered something extraordinary: a little piece of Bangladesh was alive and thriving in the heart of this big cosmopolitan city. Walking through Whitechapel and Brick Lane, I could hear the language of my childhood "আপনি কেমন আছেন?" (How are you?) and smell the spices of my grandmother's cooking, and see vibrant traces of a culture I had only known in fragments. It felt like finding my home in a place I'd never been before.

This feeling of familiarity and belonging left me with a question:

এটা কীভাবে ঘটলো?
("How did this happen?)

কীভাবে একটি উপনিবেশের প্রাক্তন শ্রমিক অভিবাসীদের একটি দল লন্ডনের একটি অংশকে তাদের নিজস্ব একটি সাংস্কৃতিক কেন্দ্র হিসেবে রূপান্তরিত করতে সক্ষম হলো?
("How did a group of immigrants, arriving as workers from a former colony, manage to transform part of London into a cultural hub so undeniably theirs?)

These questions became the foundation of this exploration, blending personal reflections with historical, cultural and architectural inquiry into the Bangladeshi community in Whitechapel and Brick Lane.

Through this work, I question whether what appears as "integration" is actually spatial reclamation. When I began this research, I wondered if it might be a form of 'reverse colonisation' , where a community once colonized is now inscribing its presence onto the city of its former coloniser. Yet the deeper I looked, the more complex it became. Is this truly a reversal of colonial dynamics, or are these spaces still shaped by forces that dictate who belongs and on what terms?

What makes this exploration even more meaningful is its connection to identity and belonging. As someone who has always lived between cultures, I've often felt caught in the space of "মাঝখানের জীবন" (a life in-between). Writing this thesis has been a way of navigating those feelings, and a way to show that architecture is not just about buildings: it's about people, histories, and identities. It's about how communities like the Bangladeshis in Whitechapel use the space to tell their stories, preserve their culture, and claim their place in the world. And, for me, it's about finding my own story within theirs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to my family:

মা - for her invaluable support in managing time to focus on my research;

বাবা & জামাই - my greatest support systems, for grounding me in my culture, encouraging me every step of the way and helping me with translations.

ভাই - my most honest critic and reviewer, that pushed me to refine my work with clarity and depth

my thesis supervisor

My deepest thanks to Caroline Rabourdin, whose enthusiasm and persistent feedback helped me shape this personal journey into a strong academic foundation.

Lastly, I would like to thank the following institutions for their invaluable resources:

- Swadhinata Trust,

  specially, Mr. Ansar Ahmed Ullah for making time to meet and provide insights of their publications

  for their dedication to preserving the history of the Bangladeshi community in the East End and for their extensive archival materials and records of oral histories and publications that shaped my understanding of Whitechapel's cultural evolution;
- Council of Tower Hamlets,

  for providing their collection of historical records and reports to tracing Whitechapel and Brick Lane's socio-political evolution;
- Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives,

  for historical maps and photographic records that allowed me to visualize Whitechapel's transformation.

The resources provided by these institutions have not only shaped the academic foundation of this thesis but have also deepened my personal connection to a history I had only known in fragments.

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FINDING HOME, FAR FROM HOME

Migration is more than the movement of people; it is a transformation of space, identity, and belonging. This thesis explores how the Bangladeshi community has reshaped Whitechapel and Brick Lane, turning them into spaces of cultural expression, resilience, and reclamation. It examines not only how migration has influenced the urban fabric of these neighbourhoods, but also how these transformations challenge and redefine narratives of postcolonial urbanism, cultural identity, and what I refer to as "*reverse colonisation*": the reclaiming of space by formerly colonised peoples within the metropolis of their former colonisers.

Reverse colonisation, in this context, does not replicate colonial enterprise; it subverts its historical power structures. From a postcolonial perspective, it describes how migrant communities inscribe their presence onto spaces once controlled by their former rulers, not through dominance, but through cultural negotiation (Bhabha, 1994).

in British-Bangladeshis, Alexander & Lidher explain how colonial legacies and global networks led to the emergence of a visible Bangladeshi diaspora in London (2024, pp. 1-6)

The visibility of the Bangladeshi's presence in Whitechapel is particularly significant given the history of British colonial rule in the Bengal area. What was once a site of extraction and subjugation has now become a place where Bangladeshis define and reconstruct their own narratives, weaving their histories into the fabric of the city. But *how did this transformation happen? How did a community, once displaced and marginalised, come to imprint its identity so visibly on this side of London? And what does it mean for the built environment to serve as a medium to cultural resistance, memory, and belonging?*

initial leading questions

My thesis is an attempt to explore these questions, critically examining how the Bangladeshi community has shaped the architecture and urban spaces of today's Whitechapel and Brick Lane. More than a story of adaptation, this is a story of "*reclamation*": a story of asserting presence in a city that, for centuries, dictated the terms of movement, labour, and identity to people from Bangladesh and beyond; a story to understand the shift in power where a historically marginalised community inscribes its presence within the city, redefining what it means to belong. Mosques, curry houses, markets, and homes are not just basic functional spaces; they are cultural artefacts that hold histories of struggle, resilience, resistance, and self-definition. Their existence, in my opinion, is more than integration; it's an example that marks a negotiation of power within the urban landscape, demonstrating how communities construct identity through space.

To frame this discussion, I will draw upon postcolonial theories, particularly from Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" (1978), which examines how the West has historically "othered" and objectified Eastern cultures, as well as Homi Bhabha's notions of "hybridity" (1994), which explores how cultural identity is constantly redefined through interactions between dominant and marginalised groups, and his perception of "third space" which is particularly relevant to this thesis, as it illuminates how migrant communities negotiate cultural identity in urban environments, creating new forms of belonging within the dominant cityscape. By applying these theories, I will examine the ways in which cultural identity is constructed, performed, and negotiated within physical spaces, revealing the tensions between nostalgia, adaptation, and resistance.

see Orientalism, (1978), Chapter 1, "The Scope of Orientalism" and Chapter 3, "Orientalism now"

see Locations of Culture (1994), pages 1-4

The research is grounded in a combination of historical analysis, archival research, and site observations, using materials from the Tower Hamlets Council's (Fig. 1) Local History Library and Archives, as well as the Swadhinata Trust. These sources have provided a vital historical foundation, helping me trace the evolution of Whitechapel from its industrial past to its present as a vibrant multicultural hub. Archival photographs, historical documents, and oral histories illuminate how migration, activism, and cultural production have shaped these spaces. Alongside this historical research, my methodology incorporates site-based observations and personal reflections. In fact, spaces such as Brick Lane and Altab Ali Park are not just locations of study; they are lived spaces, they are sites of memory, negotiation, and identity-building.

This thesis, therefore, operates on two levels: as an academic investigation and as a personal journey. Writing it has allowed me to reflect not only on the transformation of Whitechapel and Brick Lane but also on my own sense of belonging as someone whose identity has always existed between places. Through my work, I hope to contribute to broader discussions on migration, reverse colonisation, cultural identity, and postcolonial urbanism, not just as abstract theories but as lived experiences that continuously shape both city and the people who move through them.

আমি জীবন দশায় যে স্হানগুলোর মধ্যে বসবাস করেছি বা করতে হয়েছে তাতে কখনও সম্পূর্ণভাবে একটির অংশ হইনি, তবে প্রতিটির কিছু অংশ নিজের মধ্যে বহন করে চলছি। তবে, হোয়াইটচ্যাপেলে হাঁটতে হাঁটতে, বাংলা ভাষীদের শব্দ চয়ন শুনে এবং নিজের পরিচিত মশলার গন্ধ পেয়ে, আমি একধরনের নীরব স্বীকৃতি অনুভব করি -যেন আমার অতীত বর্তমানের সঙ্গে মিশে গেছে। এই রাস্তা, যা একসময় অনেক অচেনা ছিল, এখন আমার অতীত আর বর্তমানের মাঝে একটি সেতুর বন্ধন এর মতো মনে হয়। হয়তো এটাই প্রকৃত অর্থে 'অধিকারবোধ'—এটি একটি নির্দিষ্ট স্থান নয়, বরং বহু স্মৃতি এ স্হানকে নিয়ে জড়িত এবং তার সম্বলিত কস্ট ও অর্জন এবং অভিজ্ঞতা সংগঠিত একটি সম্পর্কের সুতো বন্ধন।

Fig. 1

তখন আমি নিজেকে নিজে জিজ্ঞেস করি:

"একটি জায়গা কি তাদেরই, যারা এটি গড়ে তোলে, নাকি তাদের, যারা প্রথমে এর মালিকানা দাবি করে?"

হোয়াইটচ্যাপেল কখনোই আমাদের হওয়ার কথা ছিল না, তবুও সময়ের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে বাংলাদেশি সম্প্রদায় এই ভূচিত্রে নিজেদের অস্তিত্ব এঁকেছে, ইতিহাসের ওপর ইতিহাসের সৃস্টি করে তা স্তরে স্তর যোগ করেছে মাএ ।আমিও এখানে আমার নিজস্ব গল্পের চিহ্ন রেখে যাচ্ছি —সংস্কৃতি, ভাষা, এবং পরিচয়ের মাঝখানে। যদি 'অধিকারবোধ' একধরনের আলোচনার বিষয় হয়, তবে হয়তো আমিও এই রাস্তাগুলোর মতোই প্রতিনিয়ত নতুনভাবে গঠিত হচ্ছি—খাপ খাইয়ে নিচ্ছি, প্রতিরোধ করছি, এবং আমার অস্তিত্বের সমস্ত অংশের জন্য জায়গা তৈরি করছি। এটাই আমার স্বপ্ন বা আমার প্রত্যাশা ।

(I have always existed between places: never fully belonging to one, yet carrying pieces of each within me. Walking through Whitechapel, hearing Bengali voices and smelling familiar spices, I felt a quiet recognition, as if the past had folded into the present. These streets, once foreign, now feel like a bridge between where I come from and where I am. Perhaps this is what belonging truly is: not a single place, but a thread woven through many.

But then, I ask myself:

"does a place belong to those who shape it, or to those who claim it first? "

Whitechapel was never meant to be ours, yet over time, the Bangladeshi community has inscribed its presence onto this landscape, layering histories over histories. I, too, have traced my own story here, in between cultures, languages, and identities. If belonging is a negotiation, then perhaps I, like these streets, am constantly being rewritten: adapting, resisting, and making space for all the pieces of myself to exist.)

ROOTS AND ROUTES

1

- The Early Arrivals: Lascars and the Maritime Connection
- Post-War Migration and the Growth of a Community
- Post-Liberation War Migration and the Transformation of Whitechapel
- Racism, Resitance and the Battle of Belonging
- Reclaiming Space: a Postcolonial Perspective
- Conclusion: the Right to Belong

Migration is more than a movement of people; it is a reconfiguration of space, identity, and belonging. The story of Bangladeshi migration to London is steeped in resilience and adaptation. It is also a narrative shaped by the legacies of empire, the complexities of postcolonial identity, and the socio economic realities that compelled thousands to seek new lives far from Bengal. Their journey was not only about crossing oceans but also about navigating unfamiliar landscapes, confronting institutional and language barriers, and forging communities despite formidable challenges.

in Bengalis in London's East End (2010), Ullah & Eversley describe how how the earliest arrivals integrated or resisted within the community while experiencing first-hand marginalisation

For many Bangladeshis, migration to Britain was never solely about economic opportunity: it was also about survival, dignity, and securing a future for generations to come. In every migration story, there exists an emotional and cultural struggle to hold onto one's identity while adapting to a new world. As someone who has experienced migration firsthand, I often wonder how those first arrivals must have felt as they stepped off the ships into the unfamiliar streets of East London. The echoes of those early struggles still shape the way the Bangladeshi community negotiates space today. The negotiation of cultural identity, belonging, and visibility in a city that was once the heart of an empire that ruled Bengal is an ongoing process, one that continues to evolve across generations.

Bangladeshis now represent one of the largest ethnic minority groups in the UK: over 300,000 live here, and in Inner London (see Fig. 4) they form the third largest ethnic group after White British and Black African/Caribbean populations (London Borough Ethnicity Profiles, 2021). In Tower Hamlets specifically, the Bangladeshi community is the largest ethnic group and constitutes one of the most significant Bangladeshi diasporas outside Bangladesh and West Bengal (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This demographic weight translates into strong political and cultural influence, underscoring that migrants are not just passive recipients of a host culture but active agents shaping their environment.

Postcolonial theorists Edward Said and Homi Bhabha reveal how formerly colonised peoples negotiate and redefine spaces where they were once marginalised. Their ideas on Orientalism, hybridity, and the third space illuminate how Bangladeshis have forged belonging in East London—a site once tied to imperial dominance over Bengal, now alive with new cultural identities.

according to which, the Bangladeshi born migrants, currently residing in UK in 2021 were 273,042

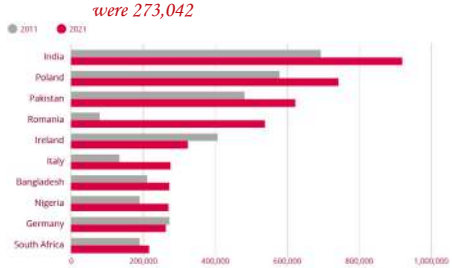


Fig. 2

Ethnic Groups in Tower Hamlets, 2021

Ethnic Group	2021	2021%
White British	71177	22.9%
White Irish	3567	1.1%
White Gypsy Traveller	110	0.04%
White Roma	2225	0.7%
White Other	45187	14.6%
Asian Bangladeshi	107333	34.6%
Asian Chinese	10279	3.3%
Asian Indian	10135	3.3%
Asian Pakistani	3341	1.1%
Asian Other	6768	2.2%
Black African	15373	5.0%
Black Caribbean	4930	1.6%
Black Other	2390	0.8%
Mixed White and Asian	4374	1.4%
Mixed White and Black African	2236	0.7%
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	3593	1.2%
Mixed Other	5206	1.7%
Other Arab	3588	1.2%
Other ethnic group	8494	2.7%

Fig. 3

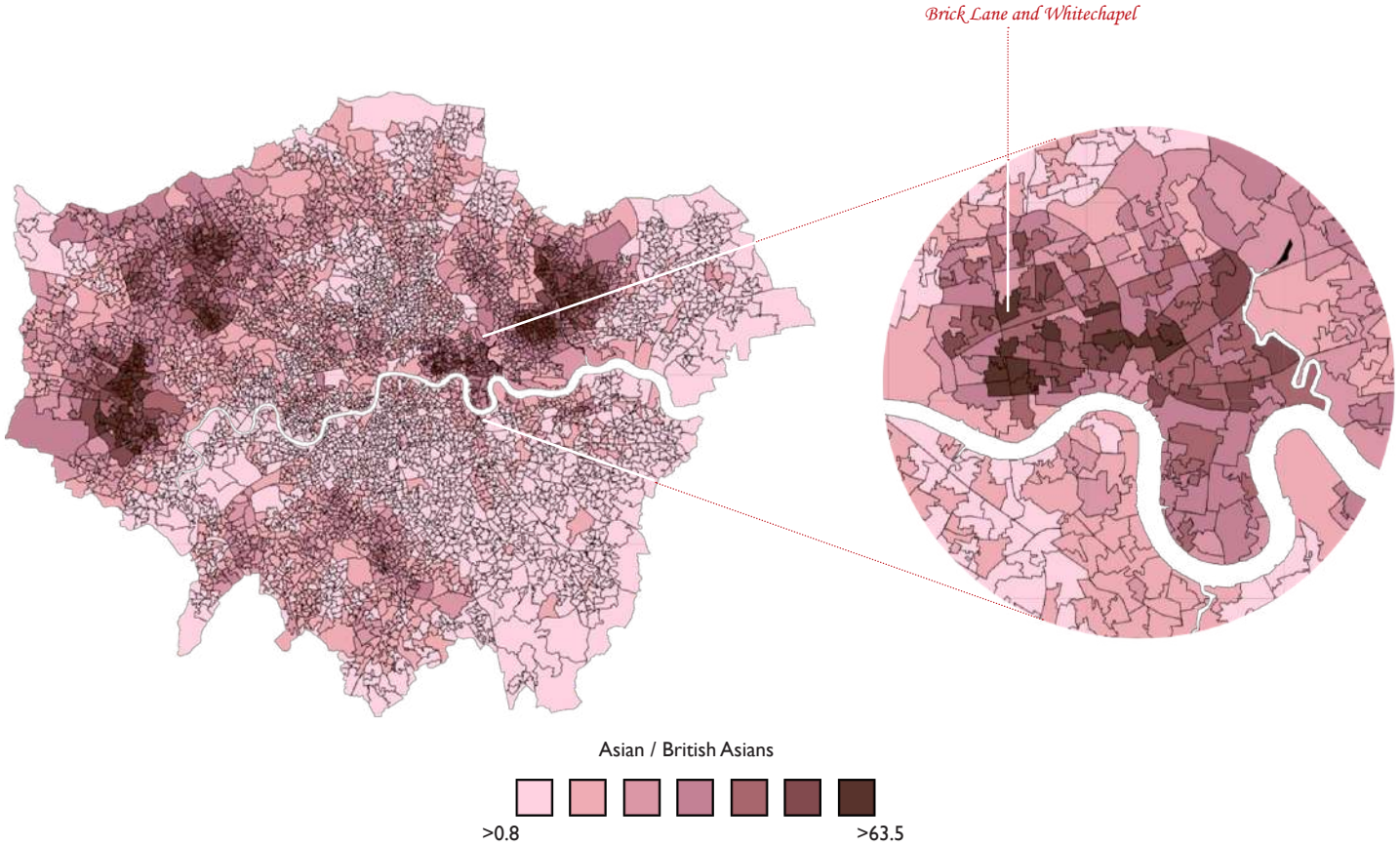


Fig. 4 - Asian and British Asian presence in Greater London and Tower Hamlets

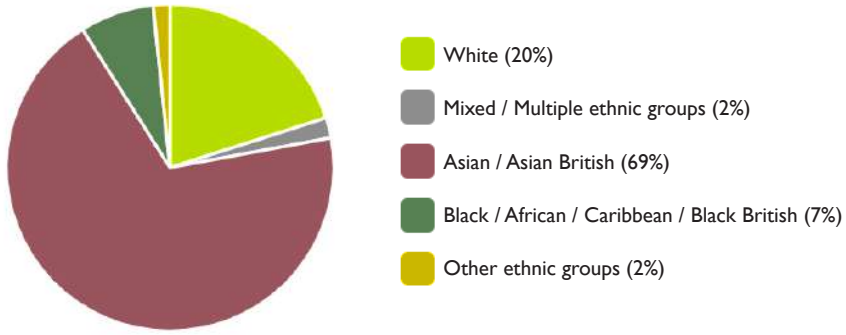


Fig. 5 - Census 2021 data of ethnic presence in Whitechapel

The Early Arrivals: Lascars and the Maritime Connection

The presence of Bangladeshis in London stretches further back than commonly acknowledged. As early as the 18th century, the East India Company established extensive maritime trade routes, drawing workers from Bengal onto British ships. These early maritime migrants were known as Lascars (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7) primarily sailors, cooks, and deckhands, who laboured under brutal conditions aboard British merchant vessels. While they hailed from a land under colonial rule, their labour was indispensable to the British Empire's global networks. Yet, despite their contribution, they faced systemic discrimination and hardship, both at sea and upon arrival in Britain.

The East India Company, founded in 1600, was a British trading corporation that exerted colonial control over Bengal, heavily influencing migration patterns to Britain. Its policies shaped the movement of workers from Bengal to the Empire's maritime networks.

Eversley and Ullah explain that "many found themselves stranded in the docks of East London, forcibly discharged or abandoned due to policies that restricted their ability to access stable housing or employment" (2010, p. 22). Many of these seamen lived in poverty-stricken conditions, often crammed into overcrowded lodging houses near the docks, with limited access to stable housing or employment. Their status as temporary workers left them vulnerable to exploitation and destitution, forcing them to rely on informal support networks and charity from local organisations.

in "Bengalis in London's East End (2010)) - a community-led oral history project published by the Swadhinata Trust, that explores the migration, struggles, and cultural contributions of the Bengali community in East London, highlighting their activism, identity, and transformation of the area, particularly around Brick Lane and Whitechapel.

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

The British legal system did little to protect these workers. The Merchant Shipping Act of 1823 prevented Lascars from staying in Britain for extended periods, often forcing them into homelessness. Those who managed to settle in East London were largely invisible within mainstream British society. They formed fragmented communities, often living in lodging houses or makeshift accommodations provided by charitable organisations. Despite these hardships, small groups of Bengali seamen began forming close-knit communities in Limehouse, Poplar, and Wapping, seeking familiarity and solidarity in a city where they were often unseen or dismissed. Over time, these fragmented groups became the first anchors of what would later become a flourishing Bangladeshi presence in East London. (Eversley & Ullah, 2010, pp. 24-26)

imposed strict regulations on non-British seamen, limiting how long they could remain in Britain and often compelling them to disembark upon arrival. Lascars, classified under this legislation, were afforded few legal protections and faced heightened vulnerability to homelessness and exploitation.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, districts like Limehouse, Poplar, and Wapping formed part of a bustling maritime hub. These dockside areas connected London to global trade routes, drawing in seamen of diverse origins. However, many Lascars who ended up in these docklands faced overcrowded housing, scarce job prospects, and minimal state protection.

"It was not easy to build a community here. […]
They faced poverty, racism, and language barriers, […] but they persevered to establish a sense of belonging."

(Bengalis in London's East End, 2019)

According to historical housing records and descritpions, the Whitechapel area was charecterised by extreme poverty, sub-standard housing and homelessness from early 1800s. (Pall Mall Gazette, 4 November 1889, quoted in Evans and Rumbelow, p 225)

For these early settlers, survival meant forging informal support networks: sharing food, housing, and cultural practices that provided a semblance of home in a foreign land. Over time, these nascent communities became the foundation for the larger waves of Bangladeshi migration that would follow in the mid-to-late 20th century. The Lascars' presence not only shaped the urban fabric of the East End but also created a legacy of transnational connections that would later facilitate chain migration (Alexander & Lidher, 2024).

আমি নিজেই জানতে চেস্টা করি,শতাধিক বছর আগে যখন লাসকাররা এখানে এসেছিল, এক অচেনা নগরে/শহরে , যেখানে তাদের কোনো আইনগত সুরক্ষা বা বাসস্থান ছিল না।, ছিল না জীবনের নুন্যতম অধিকারওচিকিৎসাসুরক্ষারকোনছাপ।তাঁরাকিকখনওভাবতেপেরেছিলেনযেতাঁদেরউপস্থিতিওতাঁদের অকুন্ঠত্যাগতিতিক্ষাভবিষ্যৎপ্রজন্মেরজন্যতিলেতিলেএকটামজবুতভিতগড়েদেবে? যাআজদৃশ্যমান। অথচ ইতিহাস তাঁদের প্রায় ভুলেই গেছে। তাঁদের অবহেলিত উত্তরাধিকার ডায়াসপোরা তত্ত্বের সঙ্গেও সঙ্গতি রাখে, যেখানে সম্মিলিত স্মৃতি প্রায়শই 'আনুষ্ঠানিক' ইতিহাসের বিলুপ্তি সত্ত্বেও বেঁচে থাকে।

লাসকারদের নিঃশব্দ পদচিহ্ন আজকের অভিবাসী সম্প্রদায়েরা উত্তরাধিকার হিসেবে বহন করে। এতে আমার মনে হয় , কি ভাবে অভিবাসন প্রায়ই অদেখা আর অদৃশ্যমান থেকে যায়, তবুও তাদের অনুপস্থিতির দীর্ঘ পরও এ পৃথিবীকে গড়ে তোলার মতো চিহ্ন রেখে যায়।

(I think about the Lascars arriving here centuries ago, lost in a foreign city with no legal protection or place to call home. Did they ever imagine that their presence would lay the groundwork for future generations? And yet, history barely remembers them. Their overlooked legacy resonates with diaspora theory, where collective memory often survives despite the erasure of 'official' history.

The Lascars' quiet footprints now form part of the diasporic tapestry that modern migrant communities inherit. This reminds me of how migration often feels: unnoticed, invisible, yet leaving traces that shape the world long after we're gone.)

Post-War Migration and the Growth of a Community

The end of the Second World War marked a turning point in Britain's relationship with its former colonies. Facing severe labour shortages, the British government actively recruited workers from the Commonwealth, creating new pathways for migration from South Asia. This policy shift allowed many Bangladeshis, primarily from Sylhet, to settle in the UK (Eade, 1997). However, migration was not solely driven by British economic demands; conditions in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) also acted as a major push factor to military unrest, economic instability, and natural disasters that intensified the need for migration.

The Bhola cyclone killed an estimated 300,000-500,000 people, worsening economic instability in East Pakistan and further motivating migration to Britain

By the 1950s and 1960s, the Bangladeshi population in East London had begun to grow. Initially, men arrived alone, finding work in low-wage industries such as textiles, restaurants, and factory labour. However, systemic discrimination in housing, employment, and education meant that many were confined to overcrowded housing in poor conditions

Systemic discrimination in housing manifested in both formal and informal practices, including racially restrictive covenants and biased lending policies. See "Second Review of the Race Relations Act 1976" (1992), for "recommendation 30" (p70-76) which details cases of landlords refusing to rent to South Asian families.

"The first Bengali seamen settled in the docks around East London. Over time, they started bringing their families, and Whitechapel became their anchor in a foreign land."

(Bengalis in London's East End, 2019)

The East End, historically a working-class migrant hub, provided an entry point for Bangladeshis. Earlier settlers facilitated the arrival of family members, leading to the gradual formation of a tight-knit community in Whitechapel and Brick Lane. With time, mosques, social clubs, and Bangladeshi-owned businesses emerged as vital spaces where migrants could maintain a connection to their culture while navigating the realities of life in Britain.

হোয়াইটচ্যাপেল রূপায়ণের বতমান চিএ এই আমাদের পূর্বপুরুষ অভিবাসীদের সাফল্য এটা দেখায় যে ,প্রবাসী কর্মকাণ্ড কীভাবে স্থানীয় ক্ষমতার কাঠামোকে পুনর্গঠিত করতে পারে, যেখানে হোমি ভাভা (১৯৯৪)-এর "তৃতীয় স্থান" ধারণা স্বদেশ ও প্রবাসের সাধারণ বিভাজনকে অতিক্রম করে। স্থায়ী প্রতিষ্ঠান গড়ে তোলা এবং বাসস্থান ও শিক্ষায় অধিকার আদায়ের মধ্য দিয়ে ব্রিটিশ বাংলাদেশিরা শহরের ভূচিত্রে নিজেদের অবস্থান দৃঢ়ভাবে প্রতিষ্ঠা করেছেন, লেফেবভ্র (১৯৯১)-এর *"right to the city"* ধারণার এক ব্যঞ্জনাময় রূপকে তুলে ধরে।

তাদের সম্মিলিত প্রয়াসই প্রমাণ করে কীভাবে পরিচয়, স্থান, আর এজেন্সি পরস্পরের সঙ্গে এক সুতোয় জড়িয়ে আছে, উত্তর-উপনিবেশিক মহানগরে টিকে থাকার এই ক্রমাগত বোঝাপড়ায়।

(The success of these migrants in shaping Whitechapel demonstrates how diaspora activism can reconfigure local power dynamics, forging what Homi Bhabha (1994) would call new "third spaces" that transcend a simple homeland–host divide. By establishing permanent institutions and mobilising for housing and educational rights, British Bangladeshis have effectively inscribed their presence onto the urban landscape, asserting a form of "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1991).

Their collective efforts highlight how identity, space, and agency intertwine in the ongoing negotiation of belonging within a postcolonial metropolis.)

Post-Liberation War Migration and Transformation of Whitechapel

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 profoundly reshaped migration patterns and solidified the activism of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK. As war and political upheaval engulfed the region, Ullah and Eversley (2010) explain how thousands of families were displaced, many seeking refuge in London's

already established Sylheti networks. The conflict not only led to an influx of Bangladeshi migrants in the 1970s but also mobilized the existing community in Britain, who played a pivotal role in advocating for Bangladesh's independence.

In his interview, Mr. Aziz, an activist who had lived in London since the 1960s, described the intensity of the protests staged by British-Bangladeshis during the war:

"We, the Bengalis living in the UK, [were] so united and so strong that our movement was successful in bringing world sentiment in favour of Bangladesh."

(Mr Aziz Choudhury, cited in Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, 2006, p. 23)

a movement that saw widespread demonstrations, fundraising efforts, and political lobbying within the UK, particularly in East London, where many Bengali migrants mobilised to amplify the call for liberation.

Figures 8, 9, and 10 capture moments from the Bangladesh Independence demonstration at Trafalgar Square in 1971. Figure 8 depicts a family of protestors carring banners demanding immediate recognition of Bangladesh's sovereignty. Figure 9 highlights speakers addressing the crowd, symbolising the diaspora's political engagement. Figure 10 portrays a sea of demonstrators, their unity and defiance reflecting the urgency of the cause. Together, these images document a pivotal moment when the Bengali diaspora in Britain stood in solidarity with the fight for freedom.

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

For many Bangladeshi migrants, the war was not just an event unfolding in their homeland—it was deeply personal, shaping their sense of belonging and political identity in Britain. Mr. Chakraborty, another activist, described how the war was not merely a political struggle but part of his lived experience:

"*The independence war, or Mukti Judho, was for our liberation. It is not only a part of my history, it's [the] plot of my life as it were.*"

(Mr. Nikhilesh Chakraborty, cited in Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, 2006, p. 23)

By the 1970s and early 1980s, an influx of Bangladeshi migrants settled in Whitechapel, drawn by affordable housing and existing community ties. Despite experiencing racism and exclusion, they persevered in building institutions that reflected their identity—establishing cafés, mosques, and businesses that

catered to their cultural needs (Alexander & Lidher, 2024).

Shops selling fish, spices, and textiles familiar to the Bengali palate began appearing along Whitechapel Road and Brick Lane, transforming these streets into recognisable Bangladeshi cultural spaces. Over time, the area developed into what is now referred to as Banglatown, marking an assertion of cultural identity within the urban landscape (Ullah & Everslay, 2010, pp 50-53)

The migration of the 1970s and 80s was not merely about survival but about actively shaping and redefining urban space. Unlike the Lascars before them, these migrants came in larger numbers and with the intention of establishing permanence. Their struggles led to campaigns for housing rights, educational access, and protections against racial violence, shaping the political consciousness of the Bangladeshi community in London (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

see interviews of migrants from the 1960 and 70s, Mr Sazzad Khan, Mr Tunu Miah, Mr Mathin Miah and Mrs Husna Matincited in strand 1 (pp 18-30) of Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain (2006) p. 23

The presence of British Bangladeshis in Whitechapel today is not just a result of economic migration but a testament to resilience, activism, and cultural assertion. The streets they built, the businesses they established, and the institutions they fought for are not just remnants of a past struggle but ongoing symbols of identity and belonging.

Racism, Resistance, and the Battle for Belonging

While the growing Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel offered a sense of cultural familiarity, it also sparked racial tensions. In the 1970s and 1980s, the East End became a flashpoint for racist attacks, fuelled by far-right groups that sought to intimidate and exclude immigrant communities.

"I personally knew Altab Ali.He was working in Hanbury Street at that time. One of my relative[s] got a factory there and he used to work there. He was maybe one or two years older than me. But we really knew each other [...] I think it was Friday and he was taking his wages home and he was attacked and he collapsed and was killed [at] the bus stop. He was stabbed and he was running to the bus stop, trying [to] get away but he couldn't make it and he died. So … that was the time. Obviously, there were few issues going in Tower Hamlets as well.People [were being] attacked all the time. Lots of abuse was going on [....] already Altab Ali was killed, then Ishaq Ali was killed [at a] takeaway. [...]then Michael Ferreiro, the young boy, was waiting for bus [and] got killed. He was Black"

- Mr Akikur Rhaman, cited in Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, 2006, p65

The murder of Altab Ali in 1978 was a defining moment. A young Bengali man walking home from work, he was fatally attacked in a racially motivated assault, galvanising the community to demand justice and recognition.
His death led to mass protests, and in the years that followed, St Mary's Park was renamed Altab Ali Park in his honour—a space that today stands as both a memorial and a site of resistance.

> *"The importance of the killing of Altab Ali was that, first of all, it happened on an election night. It happened when he was going to vote. But also it came at the time of climax of these long periods of racial attacks and I suppose you could say it was the last straw. It wasn't the fact that there haven't been any other killings and it will be wrong to say that it was worst of them all...*

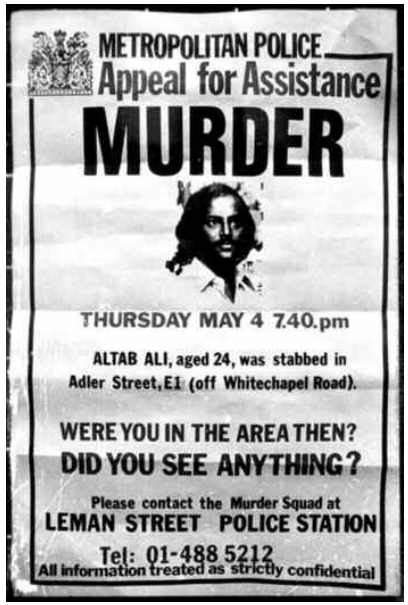


Fig. 11 - Poster by the Metropolitan Police asking for public assistance in finding the murderers of Altab Ali

... But it was the one that mobilised the community or one section of the community to protest and about seven thousand, mostly Bengali, carried the coffin to Downing Street as a protest. So I think it was a kind of symbolic importance quite apart from the fact of the killing tself. And it eventually led to the renaming of the park where the Whitechapel had originally stood.

And it was renamed Altab Ali Park in memory of this relatively unknown clothing worker. I mean many people in the East End, probably most of the Bengali people, didn't know who he was. And now the park is named after him and it has become very much a kind of place of pilgrimage for the people to remember the victims of racial violence."

-Mr. Kenneth Leech, cited in Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, 2006, p. 66

Fig. 12 - Procession behind Altab Ali coffin from Whitechapel to Whitehall. Hyde Park

Although the murder of Altab Ali occurred in 1978, it took nearly two decades of campaigning by community activists for local authorities to officially rename the park in his honor. This prolonged process underscores the persistent marginalisation of the Bangladeshi community and the challenges they faced in achieving public recognition of racist violence and its lasting impact in Tower Hamlets.

The renaming of Altab Ali Park in 1998 was more than a symbolic gesture: it marked the reclamation of urban space by the Bangladeshi community in the face of decades of marginalisation and violence.

Originally St. Mary's Park, the site was historically significant as the location of the St. Mary Matfelon Church, which had stood since the Middle Ages before being destroyed in the Blitz during World War II. (Tower Hamlets Local History and Archives).

The renaming represented an assertion of Bangladeshi visibility in Whitechapel, rejecting the erasure of the community's struggle and resilience.

প্রথমবার যখন আমি আলতাব আলী পার্কে প্রবেশ করি, তখন এর ইতিহাসের সৃষ্ট গভীরতা পুরোপুরি বুঝে উঠতে পারিনি। এখন বুঝতে পারছি । এই স্থানটিই —একসময় একটি গির্জার আঙিনা, পরে এক যুদ্ধক্ষেত্র, আর এখন একটি স্মৃতিসৌধ—প্রমাণ করে যে ইতিহাস শুধু বইয়ের পাতায় লেখা হয় না, এটি রয়ে যায় রাস্তায়, আন্দোলনের মাঝে, অর্জনের মাঝে ও নামের মধ্যে, এবং সেই সম্প্রদায়গুলোর নীরব প্রতিরোধে, যারা মুছে যেতে অস্বীকার করে।

আমি জানতে ইচ্ছে হয় , এই জায়গাগুলোর গভীরে আরও কত গল্প আজও অজানা থেকে/রয়ে গেছে?

(The first time I walked into Altab Ali Park, I didn't fully grasp the weight of its history. Now I do. This space—once a churchyard, then a battleground, now a memorial—is proof that history is written not just in books, but in streets, in names, in the silent resilience of communities that refuse to be erased.

I wonder: how many more stories remain untold beneath the surface of these places?)

a smaller replica of Dhaka's Shahid Minar (Fig. 13), originally designed by Hamidur Rahman, constructed to honour the Language Movement martyrs of 1952, who were killed while protesting for the recognition of Bangla as the official state language in what was then East Pakistan.

Fig. 13

The placement of the Shahid Minar monument (Martyr's monument) within Altab Ali Park (see Fig. 14), in 1999, was highly symbolic, connecting the struggle of British Bangladeshis against racism to the historical fight for linguistic and cultural identity in Bangladesh.

Fig. 14

The Tower Hamlets Council, working with Bangladeshi community leaders, also commissioned the construction of the iron arch shorn in Fig. 15 at the park's entrance in 1989, blending Bengali and European design motifs to reflect the area's hybrid cultural landscape.

Reclaiming Space: a Postcolonial Perspective

Similarly, the Battle of Brick Lane saw Bangladeshi activists and anti-racist campaigners physically confront those who sought to intimidate them out of the area. These moments of resistance were crucial in shaping the Bangladeshi community's political identity in Britain (Ullah & Everslay, 2010)

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) helps us contextualise how early Bangladeshi migrants were perceived by wider British society not as an integral part of the city, but as an exotic, racialised presence that was often romanticised yet marginalised. The dominant narrative framed them as perpetual outsiders, their presence marked by difference rather than belonging. This conceptualisation is part of a colonial legacy, one that has historically positioned non-Western communities as 'other' (Said, 1978). Said's theory reveals how migrant communities must navigate and resist these narratives, asserting their agency within the spaces they inhabit.

However, the Bangladeshi community in Whitechapel did not remain passive subjects within these exclusionary structures. Over time, they redefined their place, actively inscribing their identity onto the urban fabric in ways that challenged colonial-era assumptions. This process aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* (1994), which highlights how marginalised groups engage in cultural negotiation, producing new spaces of identity that resist assimilation yet transform the dominant landscape.

Fig. 15 - the iron arch at the entrance of the Altab Ali Park

ব্রিক লেনে বাংলা ভাষীদের কথোপকথন কানে আসলে আমার মনে একধরনের ঘরছোঁয়া স্বস্তি আনে, কিন্তু এর গ্রহণযোগ্যতা যদি মুনাফা বা প্রদর্শনের ওপর নির্ভর করে, তবে কি আমরা শহরের বিবর্তমান আখ্যানের প্রকৃত সহ-রচয়িতা হতে পারি, নাকি পরিকল্পিত 'অন্য' হিসেবেই রয়ে যাই?

হোমি ভাভার "hybridity" ধারণার সূত্র ধরে, অভিবাসী সম্প্রদায়গুলো আধিপত্যবাদী কাঠামোর মাঝ দিয়ে নিজেদের সংস্কৃতির উপস্থিতি দেখাতে গিয়ে সূক্ষ্ম এক সীমায় দাঁড়িয়েছে। আমরা উপনিবেশিক ধারণাগুলোকে প্রশ্নবিদ্ধ করলেও, নগরের কাঠামো কি আসলেই বদলেছে, নাকি কেবল বেছে নেওয়া কিছু বৈচিত্র্য মেনে নিতে শিখিয়েছে ?

(Hearing Bangla on Brick Lane stirs a sense of home, yet if acceptance depends on profit or spectacle, do we remain a curated "other" rather than genuine co-authors of the city's narrative?

Drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, migrant communities walk a fine line between asserting cultural presence and being subsumed by dominant frameworks. Even if we challenge colonial assumptions, have urban structures truly shifted, or simply adapted to a selective version of difference?)

Conclusion: Migration, Struggle` and the Right to Belong

From the Lascars of the 18th century to the post-war migrants of the 20th century, the Bangladeshi community has left an indelible mark on London's East End. Their journey has been one of struggle, adaptation, and cultural imprint, shaping not only their own identity but also the urban and social fabric of Whitechapel and Brick Lane. . Like the Huguenots and Jewish settlers who preceded them, they, too, have fought to sustain their presence against adversity and displacement.

Whitechapel has historically attracted successive waves of migrants seeking refuge and economic opportunity. French Huguenots fleeing religious persecution in the late 17th century established themselves here, drawn by the area's burgeoning silk-weaving industry and relatively affordable housing. In the 19th century, Eastern European Jews escaping pogroms similarly found Whitechapel's cheap rents, proximity to the docks, and a network of small workshops conducive to rebuilding their lives. See British History Online, Vol. 27, pp. 199–225

These histories are not just remnants of the past; they are deeply intertwined with the present, as this community has continued to resist displacement, ensuring that their presence is not merely acknowledged but actively woven into the city's evolving landscape.

হোয়াইটচ্যাপেল হলো এক অভিবাসনের না বলা/অব্যক্ত গল্পের মানচিত্র - এর প্রতিটি কোণা অভিবাসীদের আগমনের, সংগ্রামের এবং অসংলগ্ন পরিবেশ পরিস্থিতির সাথে খাপ খাইয়ে নেওয়ার গল্প স্তরে স্তরে সাজিয়ে বলে যাওয়ার অভিপ্রায় মাএ।

কিন্তু এই মানচিত্রে আমার স্থান কোথায়? আমি এই রাস্তায় দাঁড়িয়ে আছি একজন গবেষক, একজন অভিবাসী, এবং এমন একজন মানুষ হিসেবে যার পরিচয় বহু সংস্কৃতির সাথে জড়িত। আমি কি শুধু একজন দর্শক, নাকি আমি সেই পরিবর্তনেরই অংশ, যা আমি বুঝতে চেষ্টা করছি? তারই বহিঃপ্রকাশ এ আমার একটা চেস্টা মাএ

(Whitechapel is a map of migration: every corner tells a story of arrival, struggle, and adaptation.

But where do I fit in this map? I stand in these streets as a researcher, as a migrant, as someone shaped by multiple cultures. Am I an observer, or am I part of the very transformation I am studying?)

APPENDIX 01:
Timeline of events

1600
East India Company founded

1614
First record of Bengali settlement in Britain

1620
East India Company starts trading within the Indian subcontinent

1690
East India Company headquarter in Kolkata, India

1720
Bengal starts contributing in East India Company's work

1757
Battle of Plassey, EIC gained power and trading rights in Bengal territory

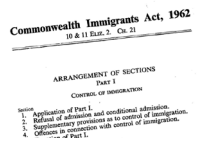
1773
First Indian restaurant in UK

1803
Opening of new East India Dock in Blackwall, Tower Hamlets

1857
British Empire started officialy ruling India, without the EIC's alliance

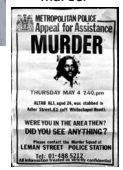
1952
Bangladeshi Language's movement day (21st February)

1962
Commonwealth Immigration Act that officially permits immigration from Commonqealth countries without restrictions



1971
Bangladeshi Liberation War and Independence

1978
Altab Ali's murder



1999
Brick Lane and Spitalfields area marked as Banglatown

2001
Spitalfields and Banglatown ward recognised offically

1600 1700 1800 1900 2000

APPENDIX 01:
East India Company

1690 - Headquarters of the East India Company, in Kolkata (India) when the British entered the Indian territory via sea, as a trading corporation to later become an imperial rulers

1760 - British company official's portrait

1914 - Map of the British India after the East India Company settled down in the territory.

APPENDIX 01:
Migration to UK

17th TO 19th CENTURY

BY SEA

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Bengali sailors, known as lascars, were employed on British ships. Some of these sailors settled in the UK after their voyages

20th CENTURY

BY AIR

With the Expansion of commercial aviation in the mid-20th century, many migrants began traveling by air.

BY SEA

Migrants traveled by ship from ports in Bangladesh to the UK, a journey that could take several weeks.

BY TRAIN

Given the geographical separation by sea between Bangladesh and the UK, direct train travel was not a feasible option for this migration route.

URBAN CANVAS

2

- From Industrial Stronghold to Cultural & Religious Nucleus
- Brick Lane Jamme Masjid: Monument of Layered Histories
- East London Mosque: Purpose-Built Anchor for the Community
- Shopfronts, Streetscapes and Economic Identity
- Brick Lane's Emergence as "Banglatown"
- Curry Houses and the Cultural Economy of Brick Lane
- Gentrification: the Fragility of Cultural Spaces
- Architectural Markers of Displacement
- Conclusion: the Urban Canvas and the Future of Belonging

Migration is not just the movement of people; it is the remaking of place. Cities are constantly reshaped by those who inhabit them, with each wave of migration leaving behind an imprint physically, socially, and symbolically. Nowhere is this more evident than in Whitechapel and Brick Lane, where the Bangladeshi presence has actively transformed the urban landscape, not only through demographic shifts but through architectural adaptations, commercial developments, and cultural expressions.

The idea that migration reshapes urban space both physically and socially aligns with postcolonial urbanism, where migrants not only settle in cities but actively redefine them. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" highlights how migrants create hybrid cultural landscapes, neither fully belonging to the colonial past nor completely assimilated into the present. See The Location of Culture (1994), Ch. 11, 'How Newness Enters the World', pp. 303–337.

Once industrial and working-class strongholds, these neighbourhoods reveal a deeper struggle over space, belonging, and visibility. Religious institutions, markets, businesses, and housing adaptations illustrate how migrant communities navigate postcolonial urbanism: a process of cultural reclamation in the very metropolis that once controlled their homeland. Central to these transformations is the tension between cultural visibility and erasure, as areas once overlooked are now threatened by gentrification and commercialisation.

The concept of cultural reclamation frames the shifting meanings of space and place within the historical context of Bangladeshi migration. As Whitechapel and Brick Lane are repurposed, renamed, and redefined, they testify to the Bangladeshi community's negotiation of a city that has been both a site of exclusion and a realm of opportunity. A fundamental question emerges: *"Who has the right to shape the city?* Beyond the story of migration, the architectural and social evolutions of these neighbourhoods speak to broader themes of resistance, belonging, and the ongoing fight to sustain cultural identity in an ever-changing urban landscape.

The question of urban agency: who has the power to shape, define, and claim space, has been central to postcolonial and migration studies. Edward Said's critique of Western representations of colonised peoples suggests that spatial reclamation in former imperial cities is an act of reversing narratives of control. See Orientalism (1978), Ch. 3, 'Orientalism Now', pp. 201–284.

From Industrial Stronghold to Cultural & Religious Nucleus

Historically, Whitechapel —and, more specifically, Brick Lane— were defined by factories, workshops, and working-class housing, accommodating successive waves of migrants from the 18th century onward. By the mid-20th century, de-industrialisation led to the decline of these industries, leaving behind vacant buildings and deteriorating housing stock. The arrival of Bangladeshi migrants after World War II coincided with this urban shift, enabling them to reclaim and repurpose underused spaces in ways that reflected their cultural and religious needs.

Bangladeshis were not merely passive recipients of the city's changes; they were active agents in reshaping Whitechapel and Brick Lane. Through religious

institutions, commerce, housing, and activism, they turned once-industrial streets into vibrant community hubs—a transformation seen prominently in Brick Lane's evolution into "Banglatown."

একটি শহরের অংশ হওয়া মানে কী? এটি কি সময়ের ওপর নির্ভর করে—একটি সম্প্রদায় সেখানে কত বছর ধরে বসবাস করেছে? নাকি এটি তাদের রেখে যাওয়া চিহ্নগুলোর মাধ্যমে নির্ধারিত হয়?

আজ ব্রিক লেন ধরে হাঁটতে হাঁটতে বুঝতে পারি, 'অধিকারবোধ' কেউ দিয়ে যায় না; এটি অর্জন করতে হয়, দাবি করতে হয়, এবং একটি স্থানের গভীরে গেঁথে নিতে হয়।

(What does it mean to belong to a city? Is it measured by time—how long a community has lived there? Or is it about the marks they leave behind?

Walking down Brick Lane today, I realise that belonging is not given; it is claimed, asserted, built into the very fabric of a place.)

The Brick Lane Jamme Masjid: A Monument of Layered Histories

The concept of 'adaptive reuse' in architecture, where buildings are modified rather than demolished, reflects sustainable urban practices that preserve historical memory. The Brick Lane Mosque exemplifies this principle, serving as a multi-faith landmark that embodies the history of migration in London's East End.

Among the most symbolic structures in Brick Lane, is the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid (or *Great Mosque of Brick Lane*) which exemplifies how architecture is *adapted* across different communities and faiths, rather than being entirely erased or rebuilt. This single structure, over the course of three centuries, has witnessed the movement of different migrant groups, each leaving spiritual and architectural imprints while maintaining the original framework of the building.

Originally constructed in 1743 as a Huguenot chapel (still engraved in the sundial present in the facade, Fig. 16), it served as a place of worship for French Protestant refugees fleeing persecution. Its modest brickwork and rectangular shape were characteristic of the period's non-conformist religious buildings, reflecting the Huguenots' preference for simple, unembellished structures that contrasted with the more elaborate Anglican churches of the time.

Fig. 16
Sundial from the French period (1743 - 1897)

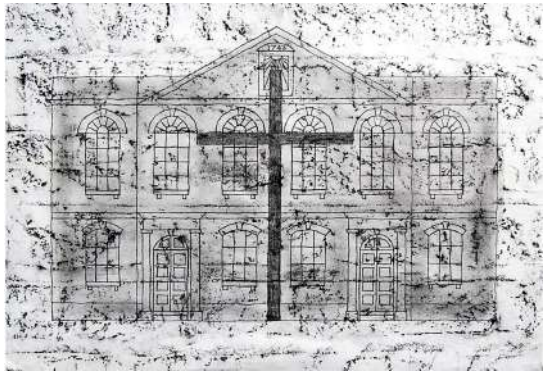


Fig. 17
Monotype of the Huguenot Church by Alice Sielle

By the 19th century, the chapel was repurposed as a Methodist church, catering to the working-class community that had settled in East London. Later, as Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe arrived in large numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the building transformed again —becoming the Machzike Hadath Synagogue in 1898, serving the expanding Jewish population in the area. During this period, a distinctive Star of David was added to the façade, subtly marking its new religious function without altering the building's fundamental form (see Fig. 18)

Fig. 18
Star of David on the facade

Fig. 19
a plaque outside a classroom in the former Machzike Hadass Synagogue (still hanged in the walls) that reads:
"This class has been dedicated to the memory of the late Deborah Kay who passed away on 17 Tammuz 3683, July 1 1933"

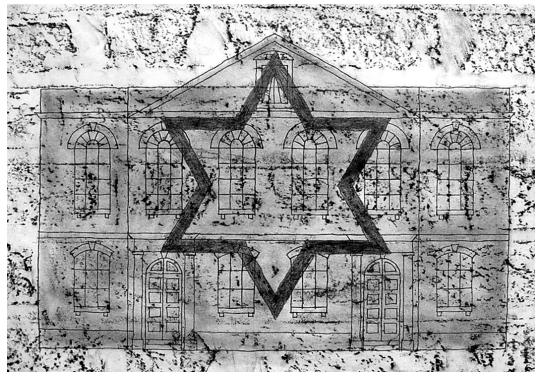


Fig. 20
Monotype of the Great Synagogue by Alice Sielle

However, as the Jewish community moved further out of East London by the mid-20th century, the building was once again repurposed—this time reflecting the new wave of Bangladeshi Muslim migrants arriving in Whitechapel. In 1976, the building was officially converted into a mosque, renamed the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid, to serve the growing Bangladeshi community (Eade, 1997).

Fig. 21a/21b
Minaret added to the Mosque in 2009

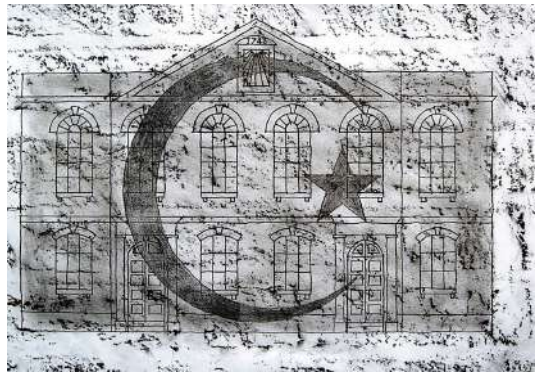


Fig. 22
Monotype of the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid by Alice Sielle

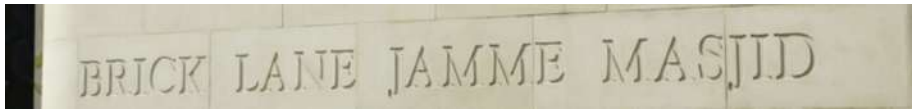


Fig. 23 - Stone carving outside the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid

আমি প্রায়ই ভাবি, ভবনগুলো কত ইতিহাসের ভার বহন করে। ব্রিক লেন মসজিদে প্রবেশ করা মানে এমন এক স্থানে পা রাখা, যেখানে শতাব্দীর পর শতাব্দী ধরে বিভিন্ন ভাষায়, বিভিন্ন দেবতার উদ্দেশ্যে প্রার্থনা করা হয়েছে।

তবুও, দেয়াল, দরজা, কাঠামো একই রয়ে গেছে—পরিবর্তন হয়েছে শুধু ভক্তির প্রতিধ্বনি। একটি স্থান পবিত্র রয়ে যায় কিভাবে, যখন এর ধর্ম পরিবর্তিত হয়?

(I often think about the weight of history that buildings carry. To enter the Brick Lane Mosque is to step into a space that has held prayers in different languages, to different gods, over different centuries.

And yet, the walls, the doors, the structure remain the same—only the echoes of devotion change. What does it mean for a space to remain sacred, even as its faiths transform?)

Architectural Adaptation: One Structure, Many Faiths

What is striking about the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid is how it has been modified for religious needs without erasing its architectural past.

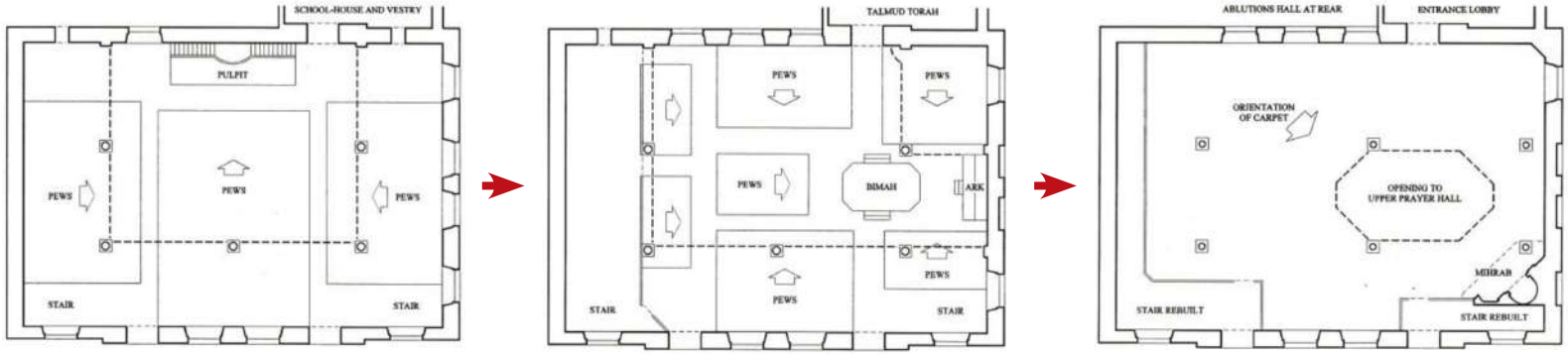


Fig. 24 - Floor plan of the Neuve Eglise (New French Church) 1743, as restored in 1869 for Wesleyan Methodist use

Fig. 25 - Floor plan of the Machzike Hadath (Spitalfields Great Synagogue) 1898 as then remodelled

Fig. 26 - Floor plan of London Jamme Masjid (Great Mosque) 1976 as remodelled in 1986-87

Unlike many religious buildings that are demolished and rebuilt, the structure has remained largely intact, with additive transformations rather than total reconstruction.

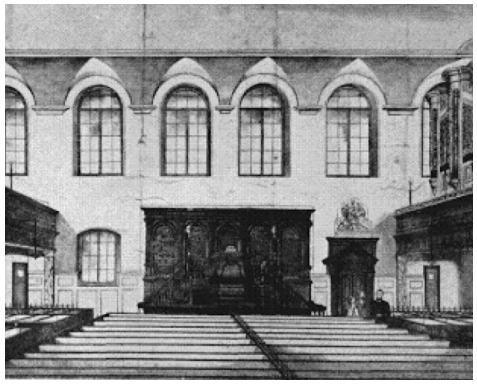


Fig. 27 - Interior arrangement of the Neuve Eglise 1743

Fig. 28 - Interior arrangements of the Great Synagogue 1898

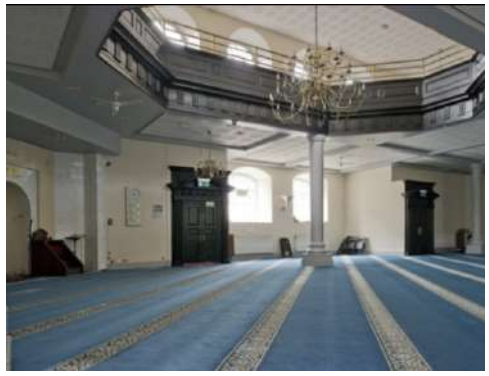


Fig. 29 - Current interior arrangements of the Great Mosque

Interior Adaptations:

- The original Huguenot wooden beams and arched windows remain, even as the synagogue's Star of David was carefully covered over when it became a mosque.
- A mihrab (prayer niche) was installed to indicate the qibla (direction of prayer towards Mecca), aligning with Islamic prayer requirements.
- Jewish inscriptions from the synagogue era were respectfully removed or painted over but not destroyed, allowing traces of the building's layered past to remain.

Fig. 30 - Interior view of the Mosque, praying area

Fig. 31 - Interior view of the Mosque, ablution area

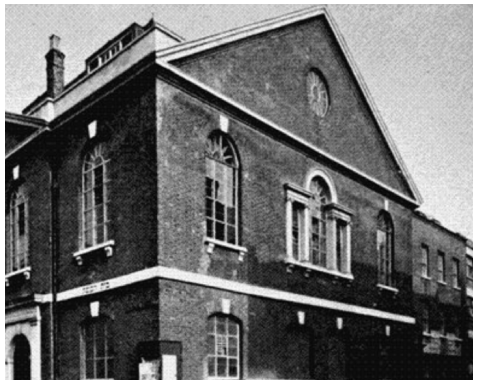


Fig. 32 - Exterior of the building as the Neuve Eglise

Fig. 33 - Exterior of the building as he Great Synagogue (illustration by John Allin)

Fig. 34 - Current exterior of the building as the Great Mosque

Exterior Transformations::

- In 2009, a 30-metre steel minaret was added to the corner of the building, giving a visual assertion of Islamic presence within the urban landscape. This was a significant intervention, marking the site unmistakably as a mosque in a way that earlier adaptations had not.

- The former synagogue's entrance, with its semi-circular arch, was re purposed to create a more defined entrance for worshippers, adapting the structure to the needs of a growing Muslim congregation.

The building's overall shape and scale remain unchanged, demonstrating how sacred spaces can evolve to serve multiple communities while preserving their historical integrity.

Gil-Mastalerczyk, in her paper "The Place and Role of Architecture in the Formation of Urban Space", (2016) argues that places of worship serve as enduring markers of historical continuity, acting as witnesses to inter-territorial events and catalysts for subsequent transformations. This building exemplifies this notion, illustrating how religious architecture contributes to the city's collective memory by embodying layers of migration, adaptation, and cultural identity over time.

Fig. 35 - Evelevation of the entrance of the building (early 1900s)

Fig. 36 - detail of steel minaret

Fig. 37 - Entrance gate

The East London Mosque: A Purpose-Built Anchor for the Community

In contrast to the adaptive reuse of the Brick Lane Mosque, the East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road represents an intentional architectural intervention. Completed in 1985, it was one of the first purpose-built mosques in Britain, financed by Muslim community leaders and international donors (Ullah & Eversley, 2010).

The mosque's visibility on the urban landscape marked a transition from invisibility to permanence, rejecting the idea that Bangladeshis were merely transient migrants. Unlike earlier decades, when Bengali Muslims prayed in cramped basements and makeshift rooms, this mosque stood as a deliberate statement: this is not a temporary presence; this is a community that belongs (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

The transition from makeshift prayer spaces to purpose-built mosques mirrors broader trends in migrant settlement patterns. For decades, Bengali Muslims in East London prayed in rented rooms or private homes, maintaining a religious presence but lacking institutional recognition. The East London Mosque's establishment signified a permanent claim to the urban fabric, asserting that this was not just a passing community but a lasting part of British society. See Bengalis in London's East End. (2010), pp. 53–56.

Fig. 38 - East London Mosque, Commercial Road, 1972

Fig. 39 - East London Mosque, Commercial Road, 2004

The blend of Islamic and modern architectural elements reflects the hybrid identity of British Bangladeshis, where tradition and contemporary urban life coexist. The mosque complex also includes a cultural centre, educational facilities, and community services, reinforcing its role as a spiritual and social anchor for generations of Bangladeshis in Whitechapel.

The architectural choices in the East London Mosque reflect the negotiation of a British Muslim identity—balancing Islamic traditions with modern urban aesthetics. Unlike earlier mosques that adapted existing buildings, this structure was designed to be both distinctly Islamic and contextually British. The incorporation of modern materials and urban planning considerations demonstrates the interplay of cultural heritage and contemporary identity. See Saleem, S, 'We Don't Want a Multicultural Minaret, We Want an Islamic Minaret: Negotiating the Past in the Production of Contemporary Muslim Architecture in Britain', (2024), pp. 718–721.

Shopfronts, Streetscapes, and Economic Identity

Beyond religious institutions, the streets of Whitechapel and Brick Lane themselves narrate a history of migration, adaptation, and economic resilience. Shopfronts with Bengali script, grocery stores selling South Asian spices, and halal butchers displaying signs in both English and Bangla contribute to an urban aesthetic of migration, where the visual landscape reflects diasporic identity.

The evolution of these shopfronts demonstrates how Bangladeshis inscribed

their presence onto the cityscape, making Whitechapel and Brick Lane spaces of cultural continuity despite physical displacement. Early migrants arrived in a city where their language and customs were invisible, but by the late 20th century, bilingual signage and Bengali-script shopfronts had become a defining characteristic of these areas (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

The use of Bengali signage in the East End extends beyond commercial establishments—since 1999, many street signs in Tower Hamlets, including Brick Lane, have been bilingual (English & Bangla). This was the result of community activism demanding linguistic recognition within the public sphere.

আমি প্রায়ই থেমে যাই যখন ইংরেজি সাইনগুলোর মাঝে বাংলায় লেখা কোনো দোকানের নাম দেখি। এটি নিঃশব্দ কিন্তু শক্তিশালী এক 'অধিকারবোধ' — অক্ষরগুলো যেন মাতৃভূমি আর প্রবাসের মধ্যে এক সেতু তৈরি করে। এই শব্দগুলো, যা একসময় এই শহরে অনুপস্থিত ছিল, এখন পরিচিতির এবং সাংস্কৃতিক অস্তিত্বের চিহ্ন হয়ে দাঁড়িয়েছে।

(I often pause when I see a shop sign written in Bangla, tucked between signs in English. It is a quiet but powerful act of belonging —letters forming a bridge between the homeland and the diaspora. These words, once absent from the city, now mark spaces of familiarity and cultural survival)

These transformations were not merely aesthetic but political—they were assertions of linguistic visibility in an urban environment that historically marginalised non-Western communities. They defied the dominant narratives of exclusion, ensuring that the Bangladeshi presence was imprinted into the very fabric of the city (Glynn, 2002).

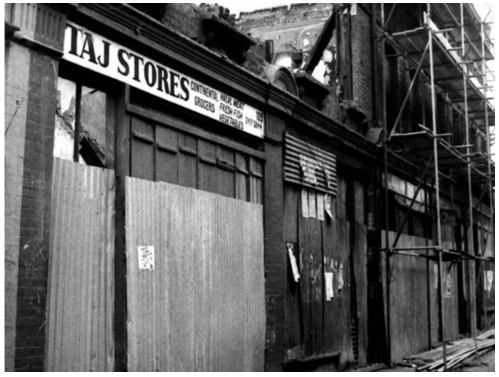


Fig. 40 - Taj Stores shopfront late 1970s

Fig. 41 - Current shopfront of the Taj Stores

Today, Whitechapel and Brick Lane retain these layers of migration in their street signage, shopfront designs, and market stalls. Contemporary shopfronts often incorporate modern branding styles while retaining bilingual elements, reflecting a hybrid urban identity. In fact, stores Taj Stores (Fig. 40 and 41), a historic South Asian grocer, maintained traditional signage that has evolved over time, blending Bengali calligraphy with modern design elements. These shopfronts not only serve a commercial function but also operate as cultural markers, offering a visual continuity of Bangladeshi presence in London.

Fig. 42 - Historical picture of Whitechapel Road, south side, dated 1936 that reads "Whitechapel road, where names over the shop suggest that one is in a foreign land."

to recreate this picture, took reference from the building number noted here "123,125"

Fig. 43 - same road, same buildings, different community and different shops. Whitechapel Road, south side, 2024

123 - 125 Whitechapel Road, E1 today "Hasan Travel and Tours" and "Human Appeal" both Muslim Bengali shops today

to recreate this picture, took reference from the building structure and openings

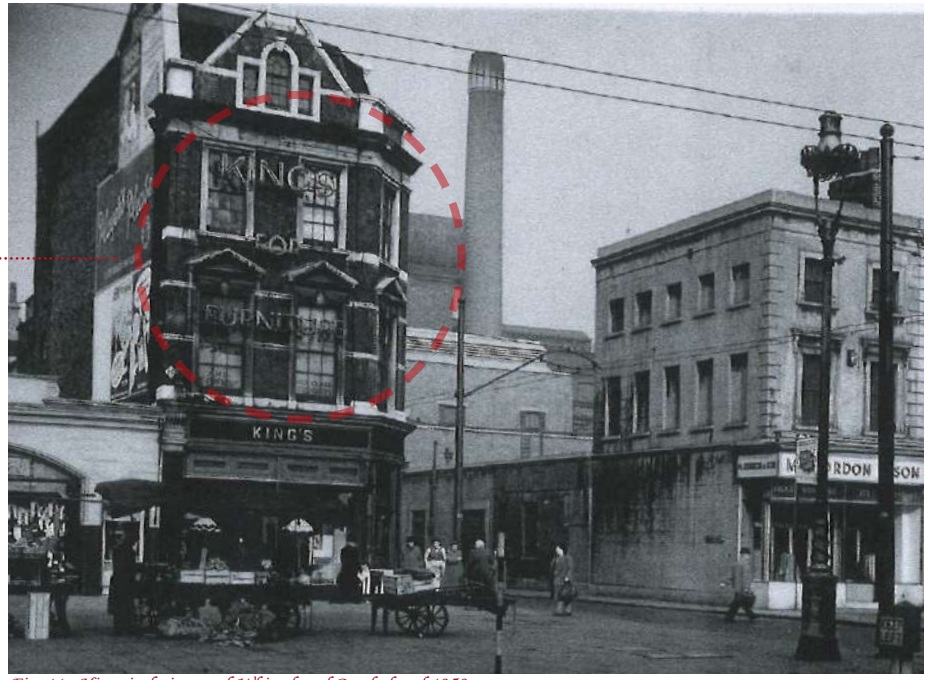


Fig. 44 - Historical picture of Whitechapel Road, dated 1950

Today the building is under construction and renovating the shop below, but it served as a sweets shop along with the ones to its left (now Modhubon Sweets)

on the opposite side of the road, is Ideas Store Whitechapel, local library.

in front: market stalls that serve the bangladeshi community of the area, selling clothes and tropical fruits and vegetables,

Fig. 45 - Whitechapel Road, turn to Brady Street 2024

to recreate this picture, took reference from the building structure

Fig. 46 - Historical picture of Whitechapel Station, dated 1896`

A striking example of how the Bangladeshi community has reshaped Whitechapel is the current signage at Whitechapel Station, which prominently displays its name in both English and Bangla (হোয়াইটচ্যাপেল). This simple yet powerful detail stands in stark contrast to a historical image of the same station from 1896, when such multilingual representations would have been unimaginable.

More than just a practical adaptation, this linguistic visibility reflects a deeper cultural imprint—one that signifies the permanence and recognition of the Bangladeshi community in East London. The presence of Bangla in public infra-structure challenges the idea of migration as transient, embedding diasporic identity into the city's everyday landscape. It serves as a reminder that Whitechapel is not just a place where Bangladeshis reside, but one they have actively shaped, reclaimed, and inscribed with their heritage.

Fig. 47 - Whitechapel Station, 2024

Brick Lane's emergence as "Banglatown"

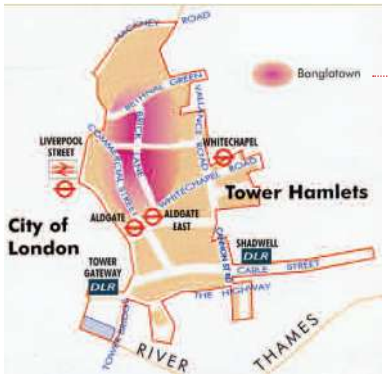


Fig.48 - Map of Banglatown

Building on this broader industrial decline, Brick Lane experienced a particularly striking shift. Once dotted with breweries and tanneries, it found renewed life in the mid-to-late 20th century, thanks to the collective efforts of Bangladeshi migrants. By establishing mosques, social clubs, and restaurants, they reclaimed spaces of industrial abandonment and transformed them into centres of cultural expression. Over time, Brick Lane came to be known as 'Banglatown'—a designation that celebrated Bangladeshi identity, yet also attracted developers and outsiders, setting the stage for tensions between visibility and commodification.

By the 1980s, Brick Lane had become a centre of Bangladeshi life, its curry houses acting as both economic engines and cultural spaces. As Mr. Akikur Rahman recalls:

> *"Brick Lane? Me and other colleagues… dream about Brick Lane… As long as Brick Lane is there, Bengalis will be there. We [have] got about 30 or 40 restaurants there and we are proud of [this]."*
>
> -(Mr Rahman, cited in Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain, 2006, p56)

This transformation was not just a passive occurrence but an intentional and collective effort by Bangladeshis to reshape their surroundings. The Nazrul and Clifton restaurants (among the earliest curry houses) helped establish Brick Lane's reputation, attracting not just locals but visitors from across London.

As urban geographer Sarah Glynn (2002) observes:

> *"Brick Lane is a living, breathing archive of Bangladeshi history in London, but its soul risks being commodified."*

The branding of Brick Lane as 'Banglatown' in the 1990s was both a celebration and a strategic move—one that heightened visibility but also made the area more attractive to developers and investors. This paradox—where the very recognition of migrant culture leads to its commodification and potential erasure—will be explored further in the next chapter, as we examine the impacts of gentrification on Whitechapel and Brick Lane.

The concept of 'Banglatown' embodies a hybrid urban identity, where Bangladeshi culture is simultaneously asserted and commodified. This process aligns with Homi Bhabha's theory of the 'third space', in which cultural identities are not fixed but negotiated through encounters with the dominant society. By transforming Brick Lane into a recognised Bangladeshi cultural hub, the community reversed the colonial narrative, turning a historically industrial and working-class area into a celebrated ethnic enclave. However, this very visibility attracted external interest, leading to the tensions between recognition and gentrification that Bhabha describes. See Bhabha's The Location of Culture, (1994) Ch. 11, 'How Newness Enters the World', pp. 303–337

Curry Houses and the Cultural Economy of Brick Lane

The most telling example of this duality is the curry house industry, which transformed Brick Lane into a culinary landmark. For decades, Bangladeshi-owned restaurants have defined the area's identity, making curry an undeniable part of Britain's national food culture. Yet, the success of the curry industry raises complex questions about authenticity, ownership, and commodification.

Curry has been absorbed into British national identity, often without acknowledgment of its colonial history. The dish that now defines "British-ness" originated in the kitchens of Bangladeshi immigrants, who initially cooked for survival rather than recognition. The irony is that, while British culture celebrates curry as its own, many of the Bangladeshi restaurateurs behind this industry face economic struggles, displacement, and loss of control over their narrative.

> *"Curry is now considered Britain's national dish, but the story of its origins lies in the kitchens of Bangladeshi immigrants who cooked to survive and share their culture."*
>
> -(British Curry Industry Report, 2020)

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023
Scotland	600	590	560	540
North East	400	390	370	350
North West	1,200	1,180	1,120	1,060
East Midlands	700	690	660	620
West Midlands	900	880	830	790
Wales	500	490	460	430
South East	1,300	1,280	1,220	1,170
South West	800	790	750	710
London Central & City	1,100	1,080	1,030	980
London Suburbs	1,500	1,530	1,500	1,350

Fig.49 - Number of Curry Establishments from 2020 to 2023

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023
Scotland	300	285	275	255
North East	150	140	130	120
North West	600	570	550	520
East Midlands	350	335	320	300
West Midlands	450	430	410	390
Wales	250	240	225	210
South East	750	725	690	660
South West	400	385	365	340
London Central & City	550	530	510	490
London Suburbs	800	760	725	705

Fig.50 - Economic Contribution (in £ million) from Curry Houses accorng to the British Curry Industry Metrics, based on submissions to the British Curry Awards and Circulation of Spice Business Magazine

Despite its deep-rooted connection to Bangladeshi migration, the British curry industry is facing a significant decline. According to the 2020-2023 British Curry Industry Metrics (Flg 49 and 50) the number of curry establishments in the UK has fallen from approximately 8,000 in 2020 to around 7,000 in 2023, with the industry's revenue decreasing from £4 billion to an estimated £3.5 billion during the same period. Rising operational costs, increasing rents, and shifting consumer preferences have made it difficult for many family-run establishments to survive.

Yet, food is not just sustenance—it is identity. It is a claim to space, a means of economic survival, and a symbol of community resilience. Bengali cuisine in

Curry Houses and the Cultural Economy of Brick Lane

London, particularly in Brick Lane, has undergone a gradual transformation, shaped by external expectations. The very act of selling food became a strategy of presence, a way of staking a claim in an otherwise exclusionary cityscape.

However, food in the marketplace is a double-edged sword. Bengali cuisine in Brick Lane has been reshaped to meet the expectations of non-Bengali consumers, sometimes diluting its cultural complexity. The pressure to cater to Western palates, standardise menus, and prioritise business survival over culinary authenticity raises an unsettling question:

"Is Bengali food in London a form of cultural reclamation, or is it merely a repackaging of identity for consumption?"

আমি বারবার সাঈদের *Orientalism* এর কথা ভাবি। কারি হাউসগুলোর মধ্যে এই দ্বন্দ্ব স্পষ্ট—এগুলোকে ব্রিটেনের জাতীয় খাবারের অংশ হিসেবে উদযাপন করা হয়, অথচ যারা এই শিল্প গড়ে তুলেছে, তারা এখনো প্রান্তিক অবস্থানে রয়ে গেছে।

এখানে এক ধরনের বিদ্রূপ আছে: এই স্থানগুলো টিকে আছে কারণ এগুলোর "বৈচিত্র্যের আকর্ষণ" আছে, কিন্তু এগুলোর আসল পরিচয় কেবল তখনই স্বীকৃতি পায়, যখন তা পশ্চিমাদের দৃষ্টিভঙ্গির সাথে মানিয়ে যায়। যে কারি হাউসগুলো একসময় প্রতীক হয়ে উঠেছিল, এখন সেগুলো নিজেদের রাস্তায় টিকে থাকার জন্য লড়াই করছে—তাদের অস্তিত্ব শুধু তখনই মেনে নেওয়া হয়, যতক্ষণ না সেগুলো ব্যবসায়িকভাবে লাভজনক থাকে।

পশ্চিমা সমাজ স্বাদ গ্রহণ করতে চায়, কিন্তু মানুষ নয়; সংস্কৃতিকে গ্রহণ করতে চায়, কিন্তু এর জটিলতাগুলোকে নয়।

তাই আমি ভাবি:

"এই স্থানগুলো কি সত্যিই পরিচয়ের পুনরুদ্ধার?" নাকি "এটি আরেকটি উদাহরণ, যেখানে পূর্বকে পশ্চিমা দৃষ্টিভঙ্গির মাধ্যমে ব্যাখ্যা করা হচ্ছে?"

সাঈদ আমাদের মনে করিয়ে দেন যে, *"The Orient is not a place, but an idea that has helped define Europe."* যদি তা-ই হয়, তাহলে ব্রিক লেন হয়তো তাদের নয়, যারা এটি গড়ে তুলেছে, বরং তাদের, যারা ঠিক করে কীভাবে এটি দেখা হবে।

(I can't help but think of Said's Orientalism. The curry house embodies this paradox: it is celebrated as part of Britain's national cuisine, yet those who built this industry remain on the margins.
There is an irony here: these spaces exist because of their "exotic appeal," yet their authenticity is only validated when it is filtered through Western expectations. The same curry houses that have become iconic are now being priced out of their own streets, their presence tolerated only as long as they remain consumable. The West desires the flavours, but not

the people; the culture, but not the complexities.

So, I wonder: "are these spaces truly a reclamation of identity?", or "are they another instance of the East being framed through the Western gaze?"

Said reminds us that "the Orient is not a place, but an idea that has helped define Europe." If that is true, then Brick Lane itself might not belong to those who shaped it, but to those who decide how it should be seen.)

As new, trendier establishments emerge, many long-standing curry houses struggle to survive. The irony is unavoidable: *the very industry that cemented the Bangladeshi presence in Brick Lane is now being pushed out in favor of a more palatable, upscale version of the same experience*.

Gentrification: the Fragility of Cultural Spaces

Gentrification is not merely an economic process—it is a form of spatial displacement that extends into the erasure of cultural memory. The branding of Brick Lane as Banglatown in 1997, initially intended to celebrate the Bangladeshi presence, became a double-edged sword. While it offered institutional recognition, it also transformed cultural identity into a commercial asset, accelerating the very processes that now threaten to erase the community.

> *"Banglatown branding was both a recognition of Bengali identity and a mechanism for economic exploitation. By the early 2000s, rising rents forced many original businesses out."*
>
> (Swadhinata Trust website, 2020)

The economic impact of gentrification has been particularly devastating for family-run businesses, including the curry houses that once defined Brick Lane's commercial identity. The same industry that cemented the Bangladeshi presence in the East End is now facing decline, as traditional establishments struggle to compete with high-end 'fusion' restaurants catering to a different clientele (Ullah & Eversley, 2010).

The success of Brick Lane as a cultural and culinary hotspot paradoxically fueled gentrification, as increased tourism and commercial appeal drew in investors and property developers. The very visibility that once empowered the Bangladeshi community ultimately made the area more desirable for high-end businesses, leading to rising rents and displacement. See Madras Courier (n.d.), 'The Ever-Changing Fabric of Brick Lane', which discusses how the area's transformation from a working-class enclave to a global attraction has led to redevelopment pressures.

The Architectural Markers of Displacement

The physical landscape of Brick Lane and Whitechapel reflects the encroaching wave of gentrification. Once lined with Bengali fabric shops, grocery stores, and curry houses, the area has witnessed an influx of high-end retailers, chain cafés, and speculative real estate developments.

A prime example is the Old Truman Brewery redevelopment, which has s parked widespread opposition from the Save Brick Lane movement (Fig. 51). Community activists argue that such redevelopment projects prioritise economic profit over social sustainability, reinforcing a cycle of displacement that disproportionately affects working-class ethnic minorities (see Chapter 3, the Future of Whitechapel and Brick Lane)

Fig. 51 - protesters standing against the Old Truman Brewery's redevelopment by standing with the Save Brick Lane movement

> *"Brick Lane was built by migrants, but now it is being reshaped for wealthier newcomers. We're not against development—we're against erasure."*
>
> (Yasmin Rahman, Save Brick Lane campaigner, cited in Swadhinata Trust's website 2020, p. 85)

The effects of gentrification are quantifiable:

- Between 1998 and 2018, house prices in Tower Hamlets increased by over 500%, making it increasingly difficult for Bangladeshi families to remain in the neighbourhoods they built (Fig.51) (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Fig. 52 - House prices in Tower Hamlets, index by HouseMetric that shows how the prices have spiked over the last 20 years

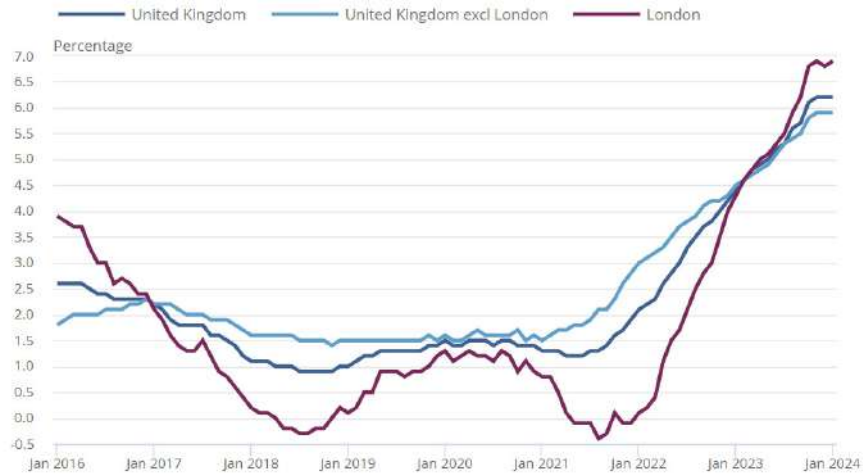


Fig. 53 - Private rental price percentage change over 12 months, UK and London, January 2016 to January 2024 showing how the prices rose by 6.2% in the 12 months to January 2024

• The number of Bangladeshi-owned businesses in Brick Lane has declined by more than 40% since the early 2000s, with many citing rising rent and property speculation as key factors.

• This pattern of displacement mirrors global urban trends, where ethnic enclaves are repurposed as heritage sites, preserved only for aesthetic consumption rather than as living, functioning communities (Hall, 2012).

In the mid-2000s, Brick Lane was home to approximately 60 Bangladeshi or Pakistani-owned curry restaurants and cafés. By February 2020, this number had decreased to 23, representing a 62% decline over 15 years.

see beyondbanglatown.org.uk

অভিবাসন আগমনের সাথেই শেষ হয় না। আমি এক সময় ভেবেছিলাম, নতুন একটি স্থানে পৌঁছানো মানেই সেখানে থিতু হওয়া, সম্পূর্ণভাবে তার অংশ হয়ে যাওয়া। কিন্তু যত বেশি হোয়াইটচ্যাপেলে হাঁটি, তত বেশি বুঝতে পারি—অভিবাসন শুধু স্থান পরিবর্তন নয়, এটি তার পরের গল্প।

স্থানের ওপর অধিকার ধরে রাখা, মুছে যাওয়ার বিরুদ্ধে লড়াই করা, নিজের অবস্থান প্রমাণ করা—এই সংগ্রাম কখনও সত্যিই শেষ হয় না। এটি রয়ে যায় বাংলা লেখা দোকানের সাইনবোর্ডে, শহরের ঠান্ডা বাতাসে গরম সমোসার গন্ধে, এবং সেই কণ্ঠগুলোতে, যা অনায়াসে ইংরেজি ও বাংলা ভাষার মধ্যে পরিবর্তিত হয়। এটি ফুটে ওঠে মানুষের নিজের জন্য স্থান তৈরি করার চেষ্টায়, এমনকি যখন শহর তাদের সরিয়ে দিতে চায়।

আমি এক সময় ইতিহাসকে একটি স্থির সত্য বলে ভাবতাম, কিছু যা আমরা শুধু পিছনে ফিরে দেখি। কিন্তু এখানে, এটি জীবন্ত মনে হয়, চলমান, বারবার নতুন করে লেখা হচ্ছে। অতীত কেবল পেছনে নয়—এটি এখানেই আছে, রাস্তায় স্তরে স্তরে গাঁথা, প্রতিদিনের জীবনের ভাঁজে সেলাই করা।

তবুও, সবসময় পরিবর্তনের এক অদৃশ্য "হুমকি" কাজ করে—স্থানগুলোর নতুন নামে পরিচিত হওয়া, ভবন ভেঙে ফেলা, মানুষকে জোর করে সরিয়ে দেওয়া, এবং ধীরে ধীরে তাদের চিহ্ন মুছে ফেলা।

Migration doesn't end with arrival. I used to think it did, as if reaching a place meant you had arrived, settled, belonged. But the more I walk through Whitechapel, the more I realise that migration is not just about movement; it's about what comes after.

The battle to hold onto space, to resist erasure, to assert belonging—it never really stops. It lingers in the shop signs written in Bangla, in the smell of freshly fried samosas mixing with the city's cold air, in the voices that shift between English and Bangla without hesitation. It's in the way people carve out spaces for themselves, even when the city tries to push them out.

I used to think of history as something fixed, something we look back on. But here, it feels alive, moving, constantly being rewritten. The past isn't just behind us—it's here, layered onto the streets, stitched into the fabric of everyday life.

Yet, there's always the looming "threat" of change, of displacement, of the slow erasure that happens when places are renamed, buildings are torn down, and people are forced to move.

Conclusion: The Urban Canvas and the Future of Belonging

The architectural and urban transformation of Whitechapel and Brick Lane, reveal how the Bangladeshi community has actively shaped the city. Through mosques, markets, shopfronts, and financial institutions, they have woven their identity into the fabric of East London.

Yet, the very spaces they built now face existential threats. The tensions between cultural recognition and economic displacement, between visibility and

Maybe that's what migration really is—not just a journey across borders, but an ongoing negotiation of space, identity, and memory. A refusal to disappear. A reminder that home is not always a place you arrive at, but something you create, over and over again. Bhabha's 'Third Space' suggests that belonging is never absolute—it exists in negotiation, in hybridity, in the spaces in between. The Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel is not a reversal of history, but a continuous act of claiming space while never quite being allowed to own it. And as Said reminds us, visibility does not necessarily mean acceptance. Marginalised communities can be celebrated, but only when they fit within the frameworks of commodification or spectacle.

হয়তো অভিবাসন সত্যিকার অর্থে এটাই—শুধু সীমানা পার হওয়া নয়, বরং এক অবিরাম আলোচনা, যেখানে স্থান, পরিচয়, এবং স্মৃতির মধ্যে ভারসাম্য খোঁজা হয়। এটি হারিয়ে যাওয়ার বিরুদ্ধে এক অবিচল প্রতিরোধ। এটি এক স্মরণ করিয়ে দেওয়া যে 'বাড়ি' সবসময় কোনো নির্দিষ্ট স্থান নয়, বরং কিছু যা আমরা বারবার তৈরি করি, নতুন করে গড়ে তুলি। ভাবার '*third space*' ধারণা ইঙ্গিত করে যে অন্তর্গত হওয়া কখনোই সম্পূর্ণ নয়—এটি একটানা আলোচনার মধ্যে থাকে, সংকরতায় গঠিত হয়, এবং সীমান্তের মাঝামাঝি অস্তিত্ব ধারণ করে। হোয়াইটচ্যাপেলে বাংলাদেশের উপস্থিতি ইতিহাসের উল্টোপথ নয়; বরং এটি একটি ধারাবাহিক প্রচেষ্টা, একটি স্থান দাবি করার প্রক্রিয়া, যেখানে সত্যিকারের মালিকানা কখনোই পুরোপুরি স্বীকৃত হয় না।

আর সাঈদ আমাদের মনে করিয়ে দেন যে, দৃশ্যমানতা মানেই গ্রহণযোগ্যতা নয়। প্রান্তিক জনগোষ্ঠীগুলোকে উদযাপিত করা হতে পারে, তবে শুধুমাত্র তখনই যখন তারা বাণিজ্যিকীকরণ বা প্রদর্শনীর কাঠামোর মধ্যে ফিট করে।

Maybe that's what migration really is—not just a journey across borders, but an ongoing negotiation of space, identity, and memory. A refusal to disappear. A reminder that home is not always a place you arrive at, but something you create, over and over again. Bhabha's 'Third Space' suggests that belonging is never absolute—it exists in negotiation, in hybridity, in the spaces in between. The Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel is not a reversal of history, but a continuous act of claiming space while never quite being allowed to own it.

And as Said reminds us, visibility does not necessarily mean acceptance. Marginalised communities can be celebrated, but only when they fit within the frameworks of commodification or spectacle.

APPENDIX 02:
Whitechapel Road Analysis


A


B


C

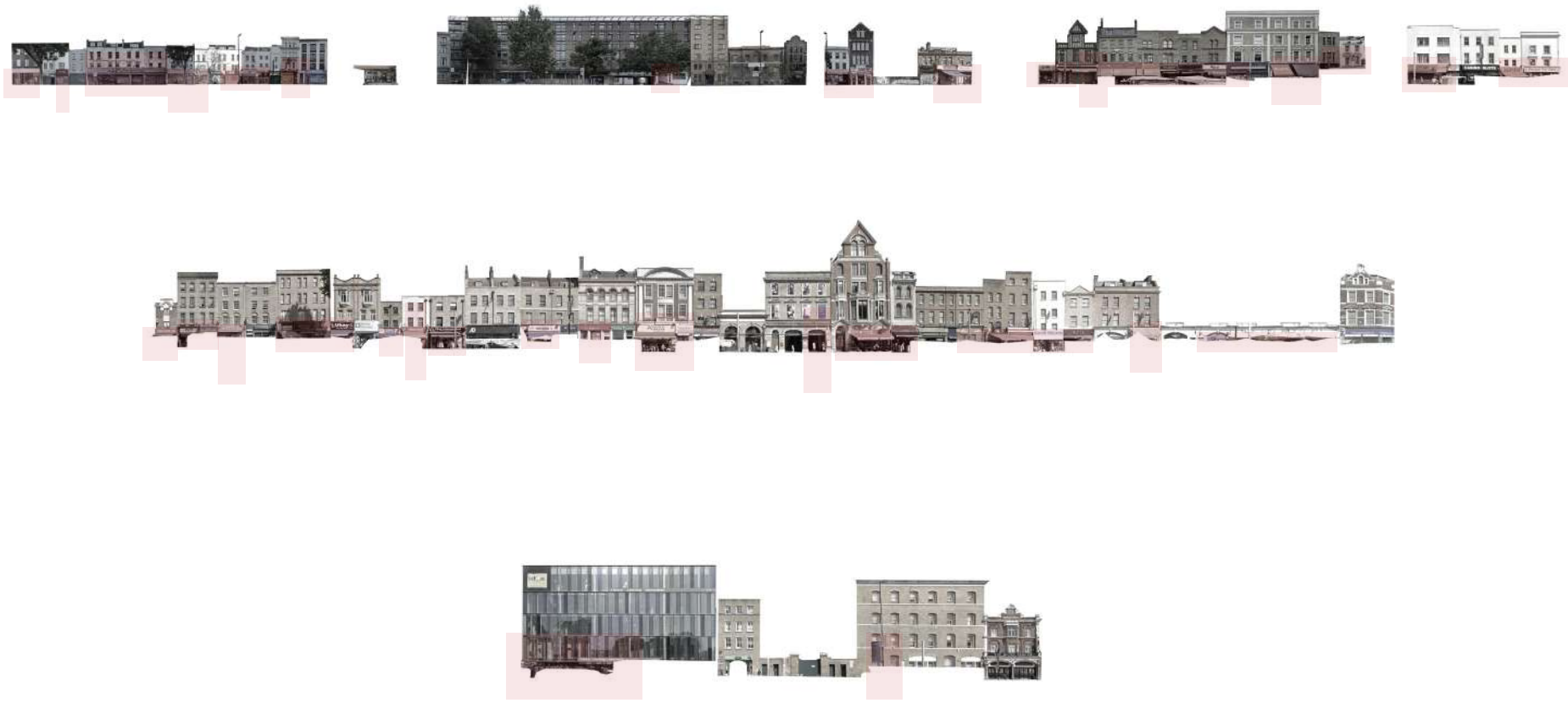

D


E


F

Briefly highlighting the elements that serve and "belong" to the Bangladeshi community

APPENDIX 02:
Collage and analysis of Whitechapel Road

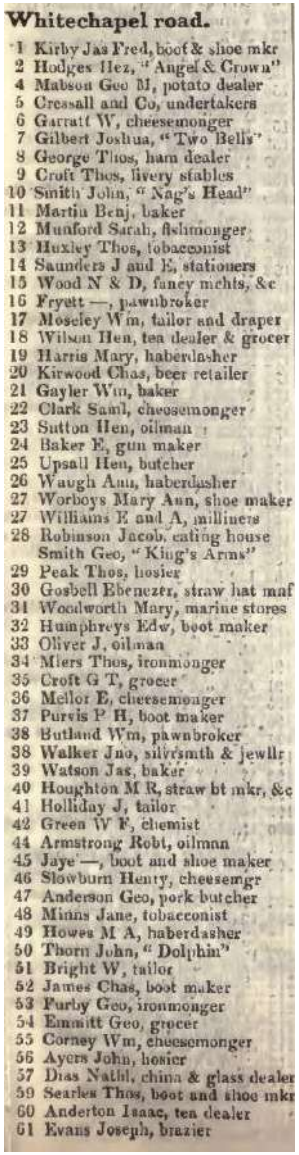


Collage of elevations extracted from street views, to analyse the buildings currently serving for the Bengali community (in terms of shops, offices or simple businesses) the north side of the Whitechapel Road, as in 2024

APPENDIX 02:
An Urban Canvas of Bengali Elements within the Streets of Whitechapel

Collage of pictures of places that represent the community of Bangladeshis within the area, from shopfronts, to street signs, market stalls and graffitis

APPENDIX 02:
Directory of 1842 in comparison to 1940 and today



Whitechapel road.

1 Kirby Jas Fred, boot & shoe mkr
2 Hodges Hez, "Angel & Crown"
4 Matson Geo M, potato dealer
5 Cressall and Co, undertakers
6 Garratt W, cheesemonger
7 Gilbert Joshua, "Two Bells"
8 George Thos, ham dealer
9 Croft Thos, livery stables
10 Smith John, "Nag's Head"
11 Martin Benj, baker
12 Munford Sarah, fishmonger
13 Huxley Thos, tobacconist
14 Saunders J and E, stationers
15 Wood N & D, fancy mchts, &c
16 Fryett —, pawnbroker
17 Moseley Wm, tailor and draper
18 Wilson Hen, tea dealer & grocer
19 Harris Mary, haberdasher
20 Kirwood Chas, beer retailer
21 Gayler Wm, baker
22 Clark Saml, cheesemonger
23 Sutton Hen, oilman
24 Baker E, gun maker
25 Upsall Hen, butcher
26 Waugh Ann, haberdasher
27 Worboys Mary Ann, shoe maker
27 Williams E and A, milliners
28 Robinson Jacob, eating house
Smith Geo, "King's Arms"
29 Peak Thos, hosier
30 Gosbell Ebenezer, straw hat manf
31 Woodworth Mary, marine stores
32 Humphreys Edw, boot maker
33 Oliver J, oilman
34 Miers Thos, ironmonger
35 Croft G T, grocer
36 Mellor E, cheesemonger
37 Purvis P H, boot maker
38 Butland Wm, pawnbroker
38 Walker Jno, silversmith & jewllr
39 Watson Jas, baker
40 Houghton M R, straw bt mkr, &c
41 Holliday J, tailor
42 Green W F, chemist
44 Armstrong Robt, oilman
45 Jaye —, boot and shoe maker
46 Slowburn Henry, cheesemgr
47 Anderson Geo, pork butcher
48 Minns Jane, tobacconist
49 Howes M A, haberdasher
50 Thorn John, "Dolphin"
51 Bright W, tailor
52 James Chas, boot maker
53 Furby Geo, ironmonger
54 Emmitt Geo, grocer
55 Corney Wm, cheesemonger
56 Ayers John, hosier
57 Dias Nathl, china & glass dealer
59 Searles Thos, boot and shoe mkr
60 Anderton Isaac, tea dealer
61 Evans Joseph, brazier

Address		Business Name	Business Type
1	Whitechapel Road	Greenfield A & Son	boot dealers
3	Whitechapel Road	Marilyn Modes	wholesale milliners
3	Whitechapel Road	Moss & Roberts	dentists
5	Whitechapel Road	Angel & Crown	Hy Green
7	Whitechapel Road	Hanbury Press Ltd	wholesale stationers
7	Whitechapel Road	Schwartzbaum Z	tailor
9	Whitechapel Road	Myers Barnett	gown manufacturer
9	Whitechapel Road	Cohen Sydney	ladies tailor
9	Whitechapel Road	Rubin Miss Regina	gown maker
11	Whitechapel Road	Walkers Dyers & Cleaners Ltd	previously the Two Bells
11	Whitechapel Road	Hunts Dress shops Ltd	gowns
15	Whitechapel Road	Koransky Hyman	furrier
17	Whitechapel Road	Nags Head, Joseph Perkoff	
19	Whitechapel Road	Nags Head, Joseph Perkoff	
21	Whitechapel Road	Davidoff Alex	trousers maker
23	Whitechapel Road	Dafae Ltd	ladies glovers
25	Whitechapel Road	Suss Joseph	photographer
25	Whitechapel Road	Osborn Bridge Club	
25	Whitechapel Road	Simmons H	tobacconist
27	Whitechapel Road	Silberstein Isaac W	restaurant
29	Whitechapel Road	Kerievsky Louis & Son	manufacturing jewellers
29	Whitechapel Road	Berger D & Co Ltd	millinery materials
31	Whitechapel Road	Layman T	pawnbroker
33	Whitechapel Road	Rosenberg Benj	jeweller
35	Whitechapel Road	Bressloff Sol & Son	boot dealers
37	Whitechapel Road	Bressloff Sol & Son	boot dealers
39	Whitechapel Road	Bressloff Sol & Son	boot dealers
41	Whitechapel Road	Medway Sam	boot & shoe dealer
43	Whitechapel Road	Medway Sam	boot & shoe dealer
45	Whitechapel Road	Feldman & Inwald	fancy goods dealers
45	Whitechapel Road	Simmons Solly	tailor
47	Whitechapel Road	Abrahams I & Sons Ltd	cigar manufacturers
47	Whitechapel Road	Fraenkel H L	naturalization agent
47	Whitechapel Road	Celia	dressmaker
49	Whitechapel Road	Rose Mrs Rose	milliner
51	Whitechapel Road	Sloutchak Jacob	manufacturing furrier
53	Whitechapel Road	Dolinsky Abner	house furnisher
55	Whitechapel Road	Dolinsky Abner	house furnisher
57	Whitechapel Road	Lefco James	tailor
59	Whitechapel Road	Playfair	amusement arcade
57	Whitechapel Road	Rosenbaum & Sons	corset materials warehouse
59	Whitechapel Road	Rosenbaum & Sons	corset materials warehouse
61	Whitechapel Road	Janus Ltd	ladies hosiers
61	Whitechapel Road	Mutual Trust (London) Ltd	loan office
61	Whitechapel Road	Franklin Miss Anne	milliner

Collage of pictures of places that represent the community of Bangladeshis within the area, from shopfronts, to street signs, market stalls and graffitis

CULTURAL RESONANCE

3

- Self-Perception v/s External Perception
- Future of Whitechapel and Brick Lane: Resistance and Reclamation
- Reclaiming Space or Resisting Displacement
- Racism, Resitance and the Battle of Belonging
- Reclaiming Space: a Postcolonial Perspective
- Conclusion: are we Reclaiming?

When I first encountered the idea of "reverse colonialism," I wanted to believe it was true. That the Bangla shop signs, the aroma of spice-laden curries, and the sound of Bangla conversations along Brick Lane were proof of a historical shift in powei: an undeniable reclamation of space by a community once colonised. Yet, deeper exploration revealed that visibility does not necessarily mean ownership. So, the question remains: "are we reclaiming, or merely occupying until we are pushed out?"

Because, presence can fill a space, but without power, it cannot hold it.

The notion of reverse colonialism often emerges when discussing the presence of formerly colonised communities in major metropolitan centres. It suggests that migrants reclaim urban spaces once dominated by imperial powers. In Whitechapel, the prevalence of Bangladeshi businesses, mosques, and cultural landmarks may appear to challenge traditional hierarchies. Yet does this presence amount to genuine control, or is it merely a tolerated "exotic" feature in a system that remains fundamentally unchanged?

To be labeled 'exotic' is to be seen, but not to belong. Edward Said (1978) argues that Orientalism constructs the 'exotic' as something both fascinating and foreign—present, yet always Other. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1994) describes how 'mimicry' allows the colonised subject to appear familiar while never being fully accepted. The branding of Banglatown, in fact, reflects this paradox: celebrated for its difference but never truly in control of its own space.

The transformation of Whitechapel and Brick Lane, far from being a straightforward reversal of colonial rule, is characterised by negotiation rather than dominance. The community's imprint on these streets is fluid: a survival strategy in a space still shaped by external economic and political forces. Gentrification looms especially large in Brick Lane, threatening to erase decades of cultural imprint and raising the pressing question of whether belonging can truly be secured in an ever-evolving urban landscape.

"বাংলাটাউন" এখন নিজেই নিজের অস্তিত্ব , যা একসময় এই এলাকায় বাংলাদেশি উপস্থিতিকে স্বীকৃতি দিয়েছিল, এখন দ্বিমুখী অস্ত্রের মতো কাজ করছে।এটি একদিকে একটা সম্প্রদায়কে উদযাপন করে এবং পণ্যায়িত করে, তাদের দৃশ্যমান করে তোলে, কিন্তু একই সাথে তাদের আরও অসুরক্ষিত করে ফেলে।

(The Banglatown branding, which once legitimised Bangladeshi presence in the area, now serves as a double-edged sword.

It simultaneously celebrates and commodifies the community, making it both visible and vulnerable.)

Self-perception vs. External Perception

For many within the community, Whitechapel is home. It is a place of memory, migration, and resistance, shaped by decades of struggle. Yet, from the outside, the area is often framed through the lens of multicultural branding, where diversity is promoted as a selling point but not necessarily safeguarded.

Is Banglatown a success story of cultural endurance, or has it become an exoticised "*relic*" (a space valued more for its touristic appeal than for the people who sustain it)

Cultural survival and commodification often go hand in hand—what is celebrated today can just as easily be repackaged for profit tomorrow.

The Future of Whitechapel and Brick Lane: Resistance and Reclamation

The Save Brick Lane Movement is a direct response to these contradictions. It represents a community-driven resistance against the forces of gentrification, commercialisation, and displacement that threaten to erase decades of Bangladeshi presence. This campaign, led by local activists, residents, and heritage groups, has been fighting against the redevelopment of the Old Truman Brewery, a project that, if completed, will accelerate the transformation of Brick Lane into a commercial space catering to wealthier clientele, rather than to the community that built it.

According to Save Brick Lane, the proposed redevelopment is not just about constructing a shopping complex—it is about who gets to belong in the city. As the campaign states:

> *"This plan is part of a wider pattern of social cleansing, where working-class and migrant communities are pushed out in favour of profit-driven developments."*
>
> (Save Brick Lane Campaign Appeal)

In my opnion, when culture becomes a brand, its survival is no longer in the hands of the community: it belongs to the market.

For decades, Bangladeshi-run businesses have defined the commercial and cultural landscape of Brick Lane, transforming what was once a neglected post-industrial zone into a vibrant economic hub. But gentrification does not acknowledge past struggles—it only sees future profit. The irony is that the very identity that made Brick Lane "iconic" is now being used to attract investors who threaten its survival.

Reclaiming Space or Resisting Displacement?

The protests against redevelopment raise a difficult question:

"*Are these acts of resistance reclaiming space.?*"

or

"*are they simply last attempts at delaying displacement?*"

If the campaign succeeds in blocking large-scale redevelopment, it may slow the gentrification process, but can it truly secure the permanence of Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel? And if Banglatown disappears, does that mean cultural failure, or simply a new phase of adaptation?

see Chapter 1: Roots and Routes

As seen in previous chapters, the Bangladeshi community has historically adapted to shifts in urban space. From the Lascars' survival in East London's docks to the post-war migration waves that transformed Whitechapel, this has always been a community of resilience. Perhaps the question is not whether Brick Lane will remain Bangladeshi but whether *its legacy will endure*, even as the physical space changes. In a way, this **echoes** the very nature of migration itself: never static, always adapting.

But adaptation is not the same as justice. The people leading the Save Brick Lane movement are not simply asking for the right to stay; they are demanding the right to shape the city they helped build. Their resistance challenges the assumption that migrant communities are temporary, that they are guests rather than authors of urban narratives.

ব্রীকলেন এর লেন ধরে হাঁটতে হাঁটতে আমি নিজেই নিজেকে জিজ্ঞেস করি ,এটা কি এখনো একটি আমাদের আপনস্থান, নাকি ধীরে ধীরে এটি কেবল সাজানো স্মৃতিতে পরিণত হতে চলেছে?

(As I walk down Brick Lane, I wonder: Is this still a place of belonging, or is it slowly becoming a curated memory?)

Conclusion: Are We Reclamining?

The Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel exists in a space of both resilience and vulnerability. The fight for cultural survival unfolds against the forces of gentrification, commercialisation, and shifting urban policies, raising fundamental questions about who truly controls a city's narrative.

Urban policies, such as the Tower Hamlets Local Plan (2020) and commercial zoning changes, have played a role in accelerating gentrification, making spaces like Brick Lane increasingly vulnerable to speculative development.
See Tower Hamlets Council (2020) Local Plan, Ch. 5, 'Growth and Urban Regeneration.'

The Save Brick Lane movement stands as a reminder that migrant communities do not passively inherit space; they fight to retain it. Yet, the branding of Banglatown exposes a paradox: *visibility does not always equate to power*. Even the idea of reverse colonialism, while provocative, falls short as a framework. What is happening in Whitechapel is not a reversal of power but an ongoing struggle within it. This brings me back to the question I started with:

"Are we reclaiming, or are we just occupying until we are pushed out?"

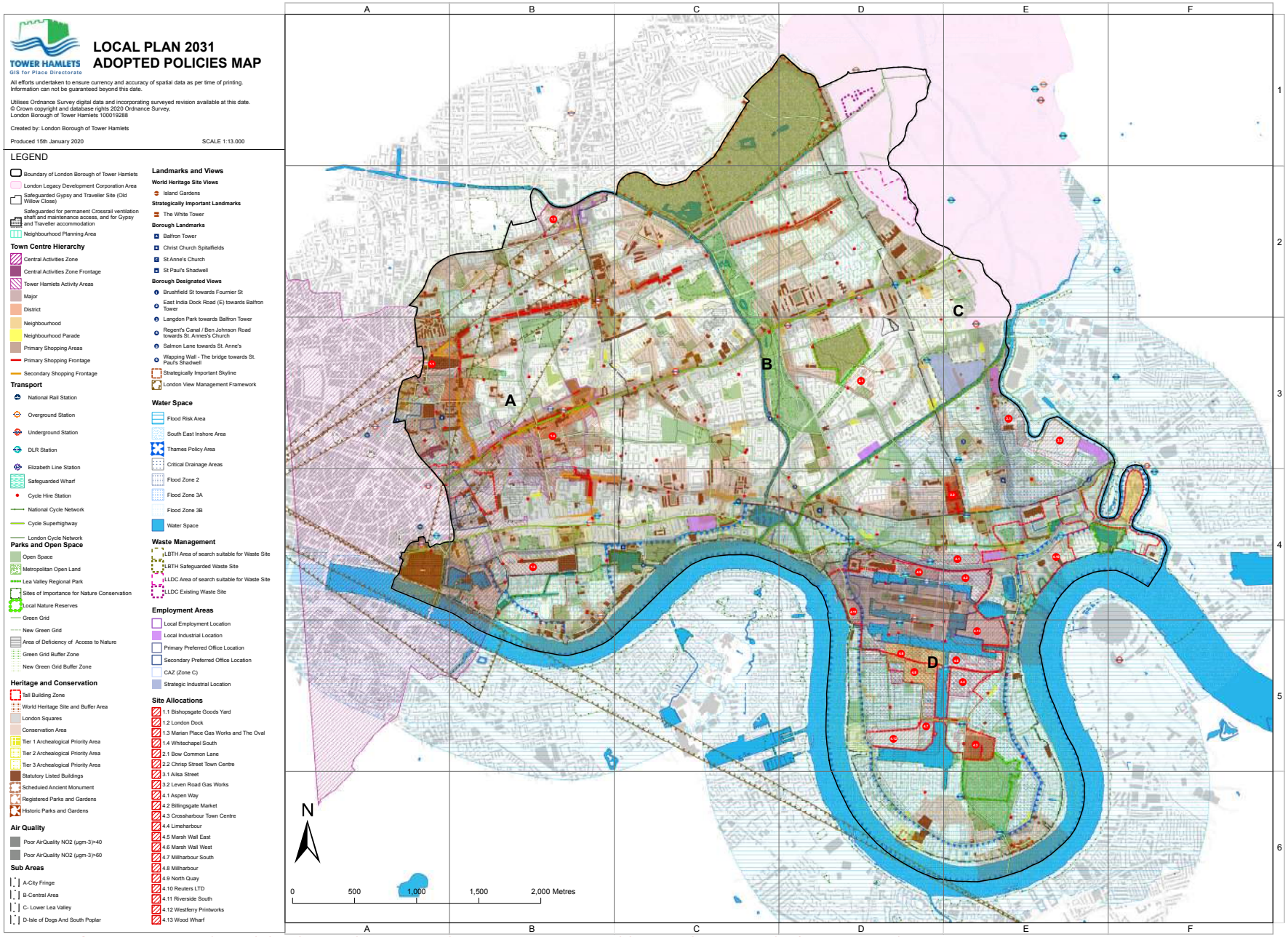
The next chapter will interrogate these findings through a theoretical lens, asking whether reverse colonialism is a valid framework for understanding postcolonial urbanism in London, or if the reality of Whitechapel requires a more complex reading.

Resistance, as seen in movements like Save Brick Lane, focuses on preventing loss rather than actively reshaping space.

Reclamation, however, involves the deliberate transformation of urban landscapes, as seen in the establishment of permanent institutions like the East London Mosque.

Because perhaps, as I have come to realise, resistance and reclamation are not the same thing: one is an act of *survival*, the other, an *assertion of power*. And in Whitechapel, the fight is still ongoing.

APPENDIX 03:
Tower Hamlet's "Local Plan for 2031"



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THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

When I first encountered the idea of "reverse colonisation", I was both intrigued and unsettled. The notion that former colonial subjects could reclaim urban spaces in the metropole seemed powerful, almost poetic: *a reversal of history.* The thought that Brick Lane, once a space of industrial labour and racial exclusion, was now distinctly Bangladeshi, felt like proof of that shift. But as I said previously, the question remains:

"আমরা কি সত্যিই এ স্হানকে পুনরুদ্ধার করছি?" নাকি "আমরা শুধু এখানে অবস্থান করছি, যতক্ষণ না আমাদের সরিয়ে দেওয়া হয়?"

"Are we reclaiming?" or "are we just occupying until we are pushed out?"

If colonialism was about the imposition of power, control, and exploitation, then can this process—one of presence, adaptation, and vulnerability— really be its opposite? Or is it something else entirely?

Rethinking Reverse Colonisation: A False Paradox?

At first glance, reverse colonisation appears to hold weight. The Bangladeshi presence in Whitechapel is undeniable—its streets are lined with Bengali shopfronts, its markets filled with familiar spices, its mosques serving a growing congregation. This visibility unsettles certain narratives of British identity, particularly for those who see migration as an intrusion rather than a historical consequence of empire. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised: visibility is not the same as power.

If power is never fully transferred but constantly negotiated, then "reverse colonisation" may be a "misnomer": what we see instead is a struggle for presence within pre-existing structures.

This is where Homi Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" (1994) becomes useful. Bhabha argues that postcolonial spaces are never about simple oppositions—they are not sites of complete submission, nor of total dominance. Instead, they exist in a constant state of negotiation, where the colonised and the coloniser shape and reshape identities in response to one another.

Whitechapel, then, is not a site of reversal but of hybridity—a space where Bangladeshi identity is asserted, but always in conversation with the structures that contain it. I see this hybridity everywhere.

আমি এখানে দেখতে পাই, ব্রীকলেন জামে মসজিদ-একটি ভবন যা হুগেনট, ইহুদি এবং বাংলাদেশিদের হাতে পরিবর্তিত হয়েছে—প্রত্যেক সম্প্রদায় এখানে তাদের চিহ্ন রেখেছে, কিন্তু পুরোপুরি অতীতকে মুছে দেয়নি। এখানে আমি দেখি কারি হাউসগুলো বা বাংগালিদের রেস্টুরেন্ট গুলো যেখানে বাংলাদেশি পরিচয় একই সাথে সংরক্ষিত এবং প্যাকেজ করা হয়—যেখানে রেস্তোরাঁগুলো টিকে থাকার জন্য

লড়াই করছে, তবুও তারা ব্রিটেনের বহুসংস্কৃতির ধারণার কেন্দ্রবিন্দু হয়ে উঠেছে।
আলতাব আলী পার্ক এ দেখি, যেখানে সহিংসতার স্থান -এক সময় স্মরণস্থলে পরিণত হয়েছিল—
কিন্তু শুধুমাত্র কারণ একটি সম্প্রদায় এর স্বীকৃতির জন্য লড়াই করেছিল।

(I see it in the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid, a building that has changed hands from Huguenots to Jews to Bengalis, each community leaving their imprint but never fully erasing the past. I see it in the curry houses, where Bengali identity is both preserved and packaged, where restaurants struggle to survive even as they become central to Britain's idea of multiculturalism. I see it in Altab Ali Park, where a space of violence became a space of remembrance—but only because a community fought for that recognition.)

Is Reverse Colonisation a Useful Framework?

If reverse colonisation implies total control over space, then Whitechapel does not fit the definition. This is not a reversal of power, but a constant struggle within it.

The more I interrogate this concept, the more I wonder if it serves more as a rhetorical device than an analytical one. Postcolonialism is not about flipping hierarchies but about contesting power itself (Said, 1978). The idea of reverse colonisation assumes that migrants now hold power over the spaces they inhabit, but if that were the case, why does the Save Brick Lane movement exist? Why do business owners fear eviction rather than expansion?

This is where Said's concept of *"othering"* (1978) helps complicate the narrative. Said argues that the West constructs the East as something both desirable and distant almost an object of fascination, but never fully integrated. Whitechapel and Brick Lane sit at the heart of this paradox:

- The curry house industry was built by Bangladeshis, yet its commercial success often benefits landlords and investors more than the workers who sustain it.
- The branding of Banglatown celebrates the Bangladeshi presence, yet that same branding has invited waves of gentrification that threaten to displace the community.
- The architecture, businesses, and cultural markers tell a story of migration and survival, yet they are increasingly marketed as heritage rather than lived spaces.

So I ask myself:

"যদি একটি সম্প্রদায়ের উপস্থিতি কেবল তখনই উদযাপন করা হয়, যখন তা সুবিধাজনক হয়, যখন এটি কেবল নান্দনিক বা অর্থনৈতিক কাজে লাগে, তাহলে কি এটাকে সত্যিকারের পুনরুদ্ধার বলা যায় ? "

(If a community's presence is celebrated only when it is convenient, when it serves an aesthetic or economic function, then is that truly reclamation?)

I return to Bhabha's hybridity, and I see Whitechapel not as a reversal of colonial history, but as a palimpsest—a layered text, where each new presence must negotiate with what came before, rather than overwrite it entirely.

Perhaps this is why Save Brick Lane is not a campaign of domination, but of survival. If Whitechapel had truly been reclaimed, if the Bangladeshi community had taken ownership of space in a colonial reversal, then these battles would not need to be fought. Instead, we see a community pleading for permanence, trying to stake a claim in a city that still dictates the terms of their belonging.

Where Do We Stand?

I keep coming back to a single question:

"যদি বিপরীত উপনিবেশবাদ সত্যি হয়, তাহলে এটি এত ভঙ্গুর মনে হয় কেন?"

("If reverse colonisation is real, why does it feel so fragile?")

When I first began this research, I wanted to believe that Brick Lane was evidence of a historical shift: a space where former subjects had turned the tables, where presence had become power. But now, I realise that this framing is too simplistic.
This is not colonisation in reverse. It is not an empire undone. It is something else entirely, *it's something messier, something unfinished.*

I find myself wondering whether the real issue is not whether reverse colonisation is happening, but whether true reclamation is even possible in a system that still operates within the logics of capital and exclusion. The more I examine Whitechapel's transformation, the more I see a pattern: migrant communities reshape spaces, but those spaces are never fully theirs.

- The Lascars who arrived in the 19th century found themselves stranded, unable to build permanence.
- The post-war Bangladeshi workers carved out a space in the city, but only in the most neglected and underdeveloped areas.
- The curry houses flourished, but they now fight for survival against rising costs and shifting demographics.

A space can be transformed by those who inhabit it, but can it ever truly belong to them?

যদি ইতিহাস আমাদের কিছু শেখায়, তবে তা হলো—উপস্থিতি স্থায়ীত্বের নিশ্চয়তা দেয় না।

(If history tells us anything, it is that presence does not guarantee permanence.)

Conclusion: a Case of Ongoing Negotiation

The idea of reverse colonisation suggests a reversal of power, but what has unfolded in Whitechapel is far more complex. Bangladeshi visibility in this space does not necessarily equate to power; rather, it reflects an ongoing negotiation, one shaped by history, exclusion, and adaptation.

Said's "*Othering*" reminds us that marginalised communities can be visible while still being kept at the margins. Bhabha's "*Third Space*" suggests that postcolonial urbanism is not about simple reversals but about hybridity, negotiation, and the production of new identities. The Save Brick Lane movement demonstrates that cultural survival is still a battle, not a victory. But what does this mean for my original question?

"Is Whitechapel a case of reverse colonisation?"
or "is that idea flawed from the start?"

This is what I will address in my conclusion. Because after all of this research, all of these stories, I need to answer the question that started it all.

CONCLUSION

“are we reclaiming?”
or
“are we waiting for the city to push us out?”

CONCLUSION

BEYOND REVERSE COLONISATION

After all of this research, all of these stories, I return to the question that started it all:

"Are we reclaiming, or are we just waiting for the city to push us out?

Whitechapel's transformation does not fit neatly into the idea of reverse colonisation. As analysed in the previous chapter, presence does not equate to power, and visibility does not guarantee permanence. The Bangladeshi community has undeniably shaped Brick Lane, yet its place within it remains precarious, constantly negotiated rather than secured.

also explored in postcolonial urban studies. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space describes how migrant communities occupy an intermediary position, negotiating identity within dominant structures but rarely fully reclaiming them. Rather than replacing old hierarchies, migrants navigate a space of cultural negotiation, constantly shifting between acceptance and marginalisation. See The Location of Culture (1994) Ch. 11, 'How Newness Enters the World'

What, then, is the future of Whitechapel? Its history suggests that change is inevitable, yet whether this change means complete erasure or simply another phase in its long migration story remains uncertain. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Save Brick Lane movement fights not for dominance but for survival, a reminder that reclamation is always fragile when space is dictated by capital rather than community. Will another wave of migrants redefine the area, or is this the last transformation before homogenisation?

If reverse colonisation implies a simple reversal of power, then Whitechapel proves that postcolonial urbanism is far more fluid, layered, and unresolved. Rather than flipping hierarchies, what is happening here is a struggle for presence within structures that continue to exclude, commodify, and erase. Perhaps we need a new framework, one that captures hybridity, adaptation, and resistance in cities shaped by both colonial pasts and neoliberal futures.

ECHOES OF BANGLADESH

তাহলে, এরপর কী হবে?

হয়তো সত্যিকারের পুনরুদ্ধার মানে অতীতকে উল্টে দেওয়া নয়, বরং এটি নিশ্চিত করা যে অভিবাসীদের গল্প কখনও মুছে না যায়—অবিরতভাবে সেই স্থানগুলোর ওপর নিজেদের অস্তিত্বের চিহ্ন আঁকা, যা কখনও তাদের জন্য ছিল না।

ব্রীকলেন বদলে যেতে পারে, কিন্তু এর প্রতিধ্বনি থেকে যাবে—শুধু নিস্তেজ স্মৃতি হিসেবে নয়, বরং এক স্মরণ করিয়ে দেওয়া যে স্থানের জন্য লড়াই কখনও সত্যিই শেষ হয় না। শহর তাদের নয়, যারা এগুলো তৈরি করে, বরং তাদের, যাদের ক্ষমতা আছে গল্পগুলো নতুন করে লেখার। বাংলাদেশি সম্প্রদায় তাদের চিহ্ন রেখে গেছে, কিন্তু এখন প্রশ্ন আর এটা নয় যে এই উপস্থিতি দৃশ্যমান কিনা—প্রশ্ন হলো, একে টিকে থাকতে দেওয়া হবে কিনা।

হোয়াইটচ্যাপেলকে অস্তিত্বের জন্য কারও অনুমতির প্রয়োজন নেই। বাংলাদেশ ইতিমধ্যেই লেখা আছে এর রাস্তায়, এর দেয়ালে, এর শ্বাসে নিশ্বাসে। বাংলাদেশের প্রতিধ্বনি মুছে যাবে না।

ECHOES OF BANGLADESH

So, what happens next?

Perhaps true reclamation is not about reversing histories but about ensuring that migrant stories are never erased—continuously re-inscribing presence onto spaces that were never meant to hold them.

Brick Lane may change, but its echoes will remain—not as passive memories, but as a reminder that the fight for space is never truly over. Cities do not belong to those who build them, but to those who have the power to rewrite their narratives. The Bangladeshi community has left its mark, but the question is no longer whether that presence is seen—it is whether it will be allowed to last.

Whitechapel does not need permission to exist. Bangladesh is already written into its streets, its walls, its breath. The echoes of Bangladesh will not fade.

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FIGURE LIST

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Figure 23 – Stone carving outside the Brick Lane Mosque

Figure 24 - Floor plan of the Neuve Eglise (New French Church) 1743, as restored in 1869 for Wesleyan Methodist use (source: Guillery, P. 2003. London Jamme Masjid 59 Brick Lane, El London Borough of Tower Hamlets. In: Religion and Place Project Site Report. London: English Heritage)

Figure 25 – Floor plan of the Machzike Hadath (Spitalfields Great Synagogue) 1898 as then remodeled (source: Guillery, P. 2003. London Jamme Masjid 59 Brick Lane, El London Borough of Tower Hamlets. In: Religion and Place Project Site Report. London: English Heritage)

Figure 26 - Floor plan of London Jamme Masjid (Great Mosque) 1976 as remodelled in 1986-87 (source: Guillery, P. 2003. London Jamme Masjid 59 Brick Lane, El London Borough of Tower Hamlets. In: Religion and Place Project Site Report. London: English Heritage)

Fig. 27 - Interior arrangement of the Neuve Eglise 1743
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Fig. 28 - Interior arrangements of the Synagogue 1898
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