

**Vivek Bald.** *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013. 320 pp. \$35.00.

**Reviewed by Karen Leonard, University of California, Irvine**

Vivek Bald has produced a masterful history of pioneer South Asian men and their women and children, mostly Bengali Muslim men who were peddlers in New Orleans and ex-seamen in New York. His painstaking research and fine writing gives us finely grained pictures of everyday life in those settings and others linked to them by these men's patterns of trade and work. There is no bibliography, but the footnotes and especially the list of abbreviations at the back show the range of sources that Bald managed to locate and consult. He has drawn on birth, marriage, death, and naturalization records, ship passenger lists, and most impressively, the United States censuses from 1880 through 1930. Four tables and two maps, not listed in the table of contents, locate the men and their families in place and time. But the impetus for the book and much of the material comes from oral history, from descendants of the men and Bald's interviews with them, so that we have their voices as well as we have statistical patterns. Bald and his chief informant, Alaudin Ullah, are producing a film as well, one eagerly awaited by the many, including this reviewer, who have seen working prints of it.

With this book, lost histories are recovered, and Bald uses them to argue for the importance of working-class histories that linked South Asian men to African American and Puerto Rican women in urban locations, histories that drew together chiefly immigrants from Bengal, the American South, and Puerto Rico across the lines of race and language. Bald points to the significant roles of women at both ends of the migrations: Bengali Muslim women who maintained households and fashioned products sold by the peddlers in America, and women in America with whom the peddlers and seamen partnered, women who facilitated their integration into multiethnic urban neighborhoods, bore them children, and sometimes worked with them in businesses. This book also contributes to world history, as Bald investigates the economy in Bengal that sent men abroad; working conditions and competition in the shipping industry, as sail gave way to steam; and the immigrant-seeking factories and enterprises in the American hinterland that drew some of these men beyond New Orleans and New York. Bald shows many of the men supporting international movements for freedom from racialized power in both the United States and the colonized world, as well as participating in the drive for India's independence, and then supporting Pakistan, and ultimately, Bangladesh. Some of these men also worked with other South Asian immigrants for American citizenship and helped develop early African American Muslim movements. The histories recovered here point to significant intertwinings of class, race, and gender, and not just locally but also at many levels of political solidarity and inclusion.

These significant pasts, with those of Punjabi Mexican rural families in California written about by Karen Leonard (*Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*), and South Asian men seeking intimacies with men as well as women, explored by Nayan Shah (*Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*), give us a much more exciting and multifaceted picture of the pioneer immigrants from South Asia who arrived before the 1960s. While Shah argues that integration into the new country through heterosexual marriages was a goal of government rather than that of the men, and while Leonard shows that bi-ethnic families of the American West produced conflict as well as cooperation among family members, Bald argues that for the Bengali Muslim peddlers and ex-seamen alike, women of color and urban communities of color were crucial to their lives in

America. African American women and neighborhoods are emphasized in these stories of work and settlement, but the fascinating individual and family histories lead in many directions; the random first encounters of seamen jumping ship and gaining jobs and accommodations are notably diverse. Bald emphasizes the cosmopolitan identities of these men, identities based on working-class multiracial struggles in urban America. He (and I) argue that the numerous middle- and upper-class immigrants taken to represent South Asians in America today, immigrants coming after the Immigration Act of 1965, often reflect more narrowly transnational identities, ones focused more on religious and kinship networks from the homeland. Surely the publication of this wonderful book will result in more descendants coming forward and the weaving of an even richer tapestry of multiracial and multiethnic identities, not only for pre-1965 South Asian immigrants, but also for immigrants from other homelands as well.