



## BOOK REVIEW

**Shabna Begum**, *From Sylhet to Spitalfields: Bengali Squatters in 1970s East London*. London: Lawrence Wishart, 2023. 232pp. £16.00 pbk.  
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Shabna Begum's exploration of the Bengali/Bangladeshi community's history of house, home and community in Spitalfields, E1, is a unique contribution to modern British urban history. It is based on interviews Begum conducted with the remaining activists who spearheaded the Bengali squatting movement in Spitalfields, interviews with contemporary activists and business owners in Tower Hamlets, archival research and reflections on Begum's own life as the daughter of Bangladeshi migrants to London. Begum's personal connection to the history she relates – she was born in Tower Hamlets in the middle of the Bengali squatting movement's biggest protests in June 1976 – means that she knows Tower Hamlets and its communities well and has had as yet unparalleled access to surviving members of the post-1970 generation of Bangladeshi migrants. Begum movingly relates how the research she undertook spurred reflections by her and her parents on need, necessity, home, violence and security that migrants to Britain from its former colonies reckon with every day.

The introduction recounts the migration of Begum's family from Sylhet to Spitalfields. They were, she writes, 'accidental squatters' thanks to a sharp landlord and a fake rent book. The book continues in five roughly chronological chapters which also open with a biographical sketch before moving on to the broader story. Chapter 1 is the story of Sylhetis in Spitalfields before the 1970s and the growth of a mostly male, transnational Sylheti community in London. Chapter 2 turns to the rise of family migration in the 1970s, spurred by war in Bangladesh and tightening immigration restrictions in Britain, the severe housing crisis these later migrants confronted and their struggle to claim and make homes in London. Chapter 3, 'Safety first', is a useful history of the rise of Bengali activist groups who patrolled Spitalfields and their sometimes-fraught relationships with wider (and whiter) anti-racist and leftist movements. Chapter 4 is a history of life after squatting as Bengalis began to win council tenancies from Tower Hamlets and the Greater London Council. The fifth chapter brings the story to the present day, discussing the redevelopment of Brick Lane in the 1990s, including designating the southern end of Brick Lane 'Banglatown' in 1997, amid the broader gentrification of the East End. Begum charts the debates within the Bangladeshi community over how to respond to gentrification, showing how the goals of businesspeople and those of community activists have not always aligned.

*From Sylhet to Spitalfields* has two great strengths. The first is Begum's siting of her story within a transnational story of imperialism, decolonization and global economic shifts. By describing the rural *bari* of Sylhet from whence the migrants came,

the reader gains an important sense of which practices, understandings and communal ways of life migrants were or were not able to maintain in East London, and why. Begum's attention to the continued mobility of Bangladeshi migrants after their arrival in London allows her to situate their story as part of a post-colonial turn to atomized economic migrants and to the complex effects of the remittance economy built by diasporas from the Global South. Begum's thoughtful consideration of how the rule of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) from Islamabad and Bangladesh's bloody War of Independence (1971) from Pakistan affected her interviewees and their experiences in Britain is an important contribution to the scholarly literature. Her work is further evidence, from a unique perspective, of how long and violent the process of decolonization in South Asia was, and the ways in which it is still being lived with today.

The second great strength is Begum's insistence on the particularity of the Bengali squatting movement's needs, aims and politics. As she points out, there are few histories of Britain's squatting movement and those that exist concentrate on the overwhelmingly white radical leftist, or radical feminist (or both) squatting movements. Begum's interviews with Bengali former squatters, men and women, is an important uncovering of *another*, and arguably more powerful, political movement that began with squatting.

*From Sylhet to Spitalfields* does, however, have some methodological and theoretical issues. Although heavily based on interviews, there is no formal discussion – only the occasional comment – of how Begum found and selected her interviewees, how the interviews were structured, what language(s) they were conducted in and how Begum processed and interpreted her field work. Begum's use of the relevant theoretical and historical literature is also somewhat cursory. The adjective 'racialised' is used too frequently to be specific. Lastly, Begum does not engage with the existing debates among historians over decolonization and migration in the former British empire. Her footnotes are short and she does not cite any major works in the field.

Nevertheless, Begum has made an important contribution to urban history. *From Sylhet to Spitalfields* demonstrates that an urban history can tell a story of home, street, neighbourhood, city and world all at the same time.

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