The Daily Star
Thursday, "June 13, 2019"
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12:00 AM, May 27, 2019 / LAST MODIFIED: 12:06 PM, May 28, 2019

In search of a new 'home'

The untold stories of Muslim migrants in the Bengal delta

Shahid Gazi looking at his 90-year-old brother's picture and introducing him to his family. One of the authors of The Bengal Diaspora returned to show him his brother's picture. Photo: Annu Jalais

Shamsuddoza Sajen

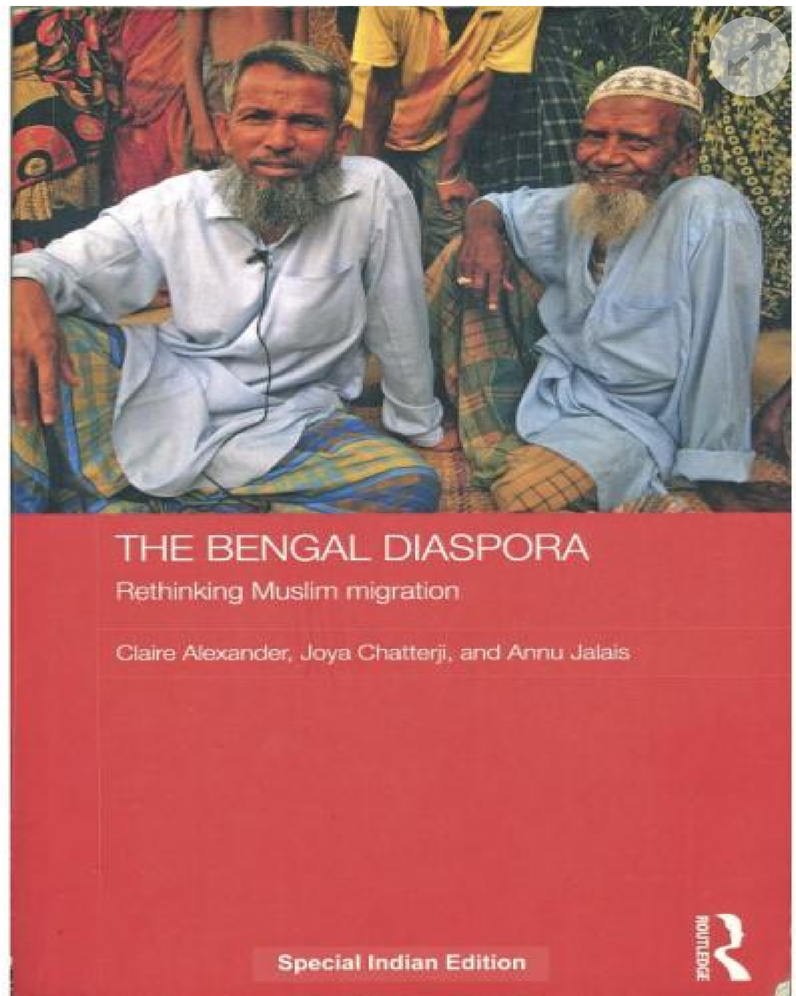
Shamsul Huq's grandfather, a Pathan from Afghanistan and a cloth dealer, travelled all the way through India to Noakhali and, being enamoured with a Bengali girl, settled there. Huq's father moved from Noakhali to Assam in search of a better livelihood.

Shamsul Huq claims that he was born in the Kidderpore docks in Kolkata in 1901. A fascination for steamships took this young man from Kolkata to London, stepping into Rangoon, Colombo, Singapore, Jeddah and "Africa" along the way,

as a crew in the British merchant marine. During the Second World War, his ship was bombed by the Japanese, leaving him with grave injuries. He left the sea-faring job for good and returned to his birthplace, Kidderpore. But the riots of 1946 and the subsequent partition forced him to flee to Assam, where his father had worked as a railway-man. During the 1960s, when tensions brewed between "settler" Muslims and the local Assamese, Huq and his family were again pushed out. Finally, he settled in Dinajpur under the rehabilitation programme of the then East Pakistan government.

The peripatetic life story of centenarian Mohammed Shamsul Huq depicts the less-discussed history of Muslim migrants—arriving in hope or leaving in despair—during the tumultuous 20th century. The extraordinary research work *Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* is a welcome effort in filling this gap.

The book weaves together threads of experiences of Muslim migrants like Shamsul Huq, who migrated from and settled within the Bengal delta region after 1947. It is a collective effort of three prominent academicians: Claire Alexander, Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester; Joya Chatterji, Professor of South Asian History at the University of Cambridge; and Annu Jalais, Assistant Professor, South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. They take a creative interdisciplinary approach, combining their respective fields of historical, sociological and anthropological knowledge, to migration and diaspora research.



Book cover. In the cover photo, Shamsul Huq (R) can be seen.

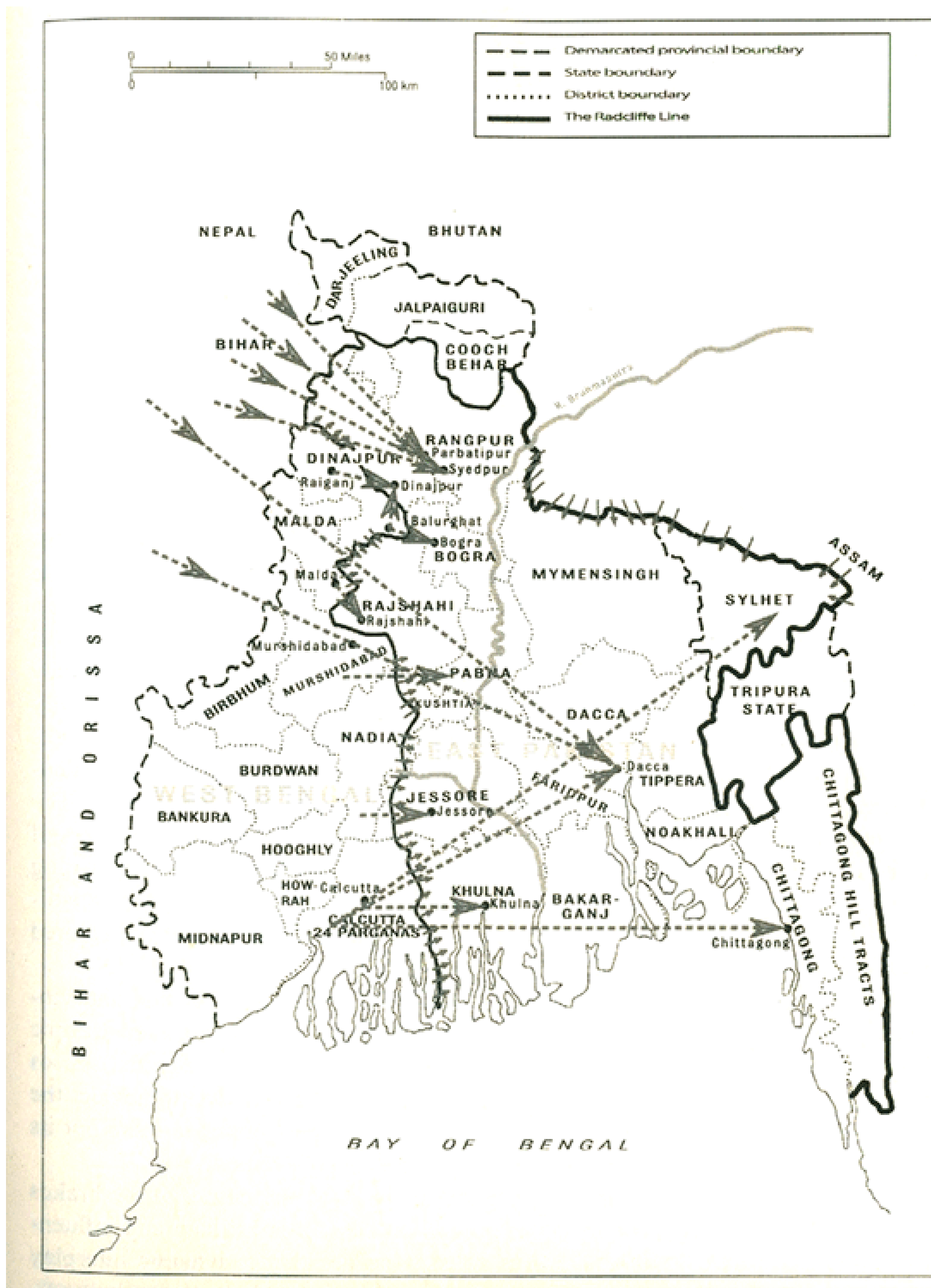
To put the discussion of post-partition migration into historical context, the book begins with a

Although the migrants and the places of arrival are different, there are some

brief history of mobility in the Bengal delta during the period between 1857 and 1947. Their discussion on peasant migration from overpopulated parts of East Bengal to the forested river valleys of Assam and Burma is critically relevant for tracing the roots of the ongoing ethnic tensions in Assam and the Rakhine province. Since the late 19th century, a large number of Bengalis had been employed by local landlords in Assam for clearing land. The introduction of the Assam-Bengal railway gave impetus to this migration flow, and by 1931 there were already almost 600,000 immigrant Bengalis in Assam. Similarly, the British government encouraged migration into Burma for rice cultivation, which attracted a large number of labourers from the Chattogram area. By 1931, there were almost 400,000 Bengali speakers in Burma. The number continued to grow until 1941, when various migration control measures were enforced to set off influx from India. These early histories of human flows across and beyond the Bengal delta prove that there was widespread mobility before partition, which has had huge implications in the shaping and reshaping of the history of the region. It also challenges the nostalgic belief that before 1947 Bengal was a comfortably settled society.

similar patterns of constraints and contingencies in finding a new "home".

In explaining the patterns of migration and settlement during the post-partition period, the book proposes a theoretical framework of "mobility capital", which is a bundle of capacities, predispositions, and connections, often rooted in the family and group histories of the migrants. It is observed that migrants with similar types of mobility capital tended to move to similar destinations. Those who lacked adequate mobility capital or were tied by obligations to "home" had to end up in impoverished communities of the internally displaced. The life stories of the migrants inform that actual monetary resources and literacy have not been as critical as one might expect. Lascars (seafarers) from Sylhet, for example, had very little money or education. But a large number of them succeeded in migrating to London and Manchester through their exceptionally rich and extended networks established over decades of travel on the high seas.



Migrations of Muslims from West Bengal, Bihar and Assam to East Pakistan, 1946–1970. Reproduced from Bengal Diaspora.

This book argues that mobility and immobility are interlinked concepts and that “staying on” provides invaluable insights into the process of movement. To illustrate the point, the researchers present experiences of two branches of the same family: those of Shahid and Jalal Gazi. The two families had neither seen nor heard from each other for several decades, until the researchers of this book re-established their connection by bringing news and photographs of Jalal over to Shahid in Bangladesh.

Shahid and his family migrated to East Pakistan in 1950, while Jalal stayed back in West Bengal to look after the family mosque and graveyard. Jalal and his family had similar contacts on the other side of the border, but they chose not to move. Their living standard has degraded over the years and they are also deeply pessimistic about their prospects. But for generations, they have decided to remain rooted to the idea of their ancestral "home". On the other hand, although Shahid's family leads a life of rural prosperity in Bangladesh, they are still treated as outsiders.

> **The main contribution of the book is to bring into focus the stories of the marginal, weak and invisible migrants who find little space in the overpowering nationalist narratives of the three countries divided through the 1947 partition and 1971's War of Liberation.**

There are many migrants on the peripheries like Shahid, who barely crossed the Radcliffe Line and settled within the peripheries of national boundaries. In Bangladesh, Satkhira was such a destination where a large number of migrants took refuge after partition. Despite the fact that their own village was only a few miles away on the other side of the border, the people among whom these families settled and with whom they shared customs, religion and even kinship relations were not welcoming. They are called "refuz". The local people treat them with suspicion and rumours say that most "refuz" had been *razakars* who helped the Pakistani Army during the Liberation War. The researchers observe that more than 40 years after Bangladesh's creation and despite decades of living together, nothing has erased the stamp of their "Indianness" and their "refuz" past.

Altab Ali Park was named in 1994 in memory of a young man murdered nearby in 1978 in a racist attack. Photo: Jim Linwood/Flickr

The book contrasts the experience of settling in a new destination within Bengal with stories of pioneer Bengali Muslim migrants in London. Although the migrants and the places of arrival are different, there are some similar patterns of constraints and contingencies in finding a new "home". Rajonuddin Jalal, who came to the Tower Hamlets in 1972, shares how the Bengali Muslim community over the years have been confronted with racial attacks by the locals: "Every day [there was] harassment. I was beaten up a few times and [so were] most other people who lived here. And so I think the younger generation realized that they had to stay in this country and decided to fight back … And I think there was a phase in the mid-70s, [when] the Bengali community came of age. These murders [murders of Bengali Muslim migrants in racial attacks in the 70s] … created the impetus for going public with the resistance, and eventually the racist thugs were polarized and were driven out of the area."

The process of claims-staking and creating an identity in the face of social exclusion is often subtler and more complex than crude resistance. Shahid, now, doesn't seek respectability in society in his Bengali identity (although he is a Bengali-speaker born and bred). He and his son emphasise more on a modern Muslim identity based on piety, prosperity and the practice of "proper" Islam.

Shahid's sons have earned decent sums of money by careful investment in fisheries. They spent it not on education, but on land and religious philanthropy.

On the other hand, Bengali Muslim migrants in London attribute their identity to both Bengali and Muslim traditions and symbols such as mosques and Shahid Minar. They maintain transnational links to their villages in Sylhet, which form a basis for future migration of their fellow villagers. The process of settlement in London is facilitated and supported through these local links and institutions. The story of Jubair Ahmad who owned an Indian takeaway in East London is a good example in this regard. Jubair arrived in Britain with his mother and younger sister in 1985 as part of a larger wave of family reunification. His father had arrived in London in 1945, being discharged from the Merchant Navy supply ships. Jubair's father followed the footsteps of his maternal uncle, who had started along the Kushiara river in Sylhet.

The researchers also find an interesting similarity between the Tazia procession by Biharis in Bangladesh and the commemoration of Ekushey at the Shahid Minar in East London by Bengali migrants. Although the religious practice of Ashura is generally attributed to Shias, the Sunni Biharis in Bangladesh observe this occasion with great enthusiasm. The authors observe that Muharram is one such moment when Biharis from different neighbourhoods, downplaying the majoritarian threat under which they have been ghettoised, come out on the streets of the national capital to play out the historical account and, in so doing, fleetingly become a community. Perhaps the veneration of Husain's death offers them a reprieve to remember their dead and grieve for those for whom they have never been able to publicly commemorate. Similarly, the commemoration of Ekushey by the Bengali diaspora in Britain is an essential and integral part of their struggle for belonging in contemporary Britain.

Muharram observations of the Sunni Bihari community, Dhaka. Photo: Annu Jalais

History-writing is another creative space where the migrant authors try to seek rights and recognition on behalf of their community in their place of settlement. The authors draw interesting parallels between two books to substantiate the point: *The Root and Tales of Bangladeshi Settlers* and *Biharis* and *The Indian Emigres in Bangladesh: An Objective Analysis*. The first one is an optimistic tale of sojourn and eventual settlement of Sylheti people in the UK told in the first person by Yousuf Choudhury, who migrated to Britain in the 1950s. The second, by contrast, is a grim account of forced migration of Urdu-speaking Muslims from Bihar to Bangladesh through the two bloody tides of the 1947 partition and the War of Liberation in 1971. The story is told as a personal account of Ahmed Ilias—a journalist, social worker and poet—himself a Bihari who migrated from Calcutta to East Pakistan in 1953.

Bengal Diaspora also draws attention to the importance of studying the often-neglected issue of female migration since it is integrally concerned with the processes of social and cultural change and transformation within and across borders, places and times. The researchers have interviewed and explored the

life stories of several female migrants and situate their experience of migration in a broad historical perspective. A common fact that can be gleaned from their diverse experiences is that of marriage as a key structuring force in female migration, and movement of a bride into her husband's household as a profound and permanent transition of her life. The focus on brides' migration experiences allows us to recognise the contingent and shifting nature of social and cultural norms, traditions, and rituals at both ends of the migrant journey.

The main contribution of the book is to bring into focus the stories of the marginal, weak and invisible migrants who find little space in the overpowering nationalist narratives of the three countries divided through the 1947 partition and 1971's War of Liberation. The authors try to initiate dialogue between different experiences of migration. This dialogue must move on and should be expected to encourage further illuminating research on the history of mobility and immobility in the Bengal region.

Book information

Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji and Annu Jalais. 2016. *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*. Special Indian Edition: Routledge. xiii + 286 pp. Tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, glossary, index. Rs 895.00 (paperback).

The authors of the *Bengal Diaspora* reached out to share the website for the project, which has resources for researchers, teachers and children.

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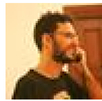

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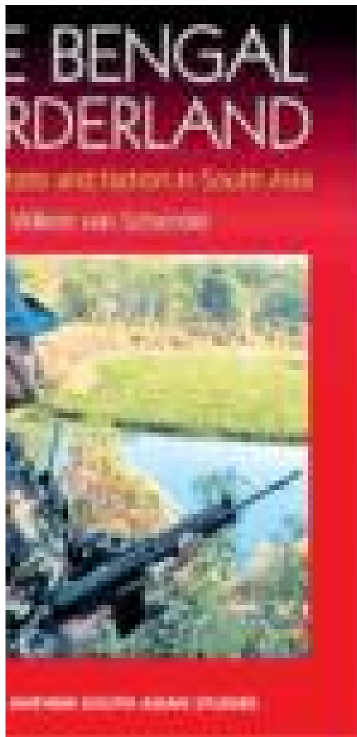

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