

Ten years ago I met Gazi in Bangladesh's Satkhira region, in a small island called Koikhali. He had come with his immediate family about 60 years back, at the stroke of midnight, with nothing but the clothes on his back. Although in the beginning he had been able to keep in touch with the rest of his family in India, he had not heard from them in many years. The Indian government had started building a wall and anyone trying to travel to the other side without official documentation was beaten, locked-up or killed. He told me about his family and the circumstances in which he had left; so I, who had a passport and travel permits, decided to visit his 90-year-old brother and family back in India. Following the address he gave me, I went to a village in the Basirhat subdivision in the district of the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. When I located the house and found the old man, I showed him a photo of his brother and his children. His eyes started to water. We struck up a conversation and I probed, 'Why did you not leave?'

After some moments spent in silence he said, 'Why did he leave?'—that's the question you should ask and I can't answer it for him.'

The book *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* co-authored by Joya Chatterji, Claire Alexander and myself (Routledge, 2015), was created out of a desire to find the answers to such questions, questions that had for too long remained both un-asked and un-answered.

In 2005, all three of us were based at the London School of Economics, albeit in different departments. Joya was in History, Claire in Sociology, and myself in Anthropology. One afternoon, we decided to meet for tea and Joya suggested, 'How about we do a project together?'

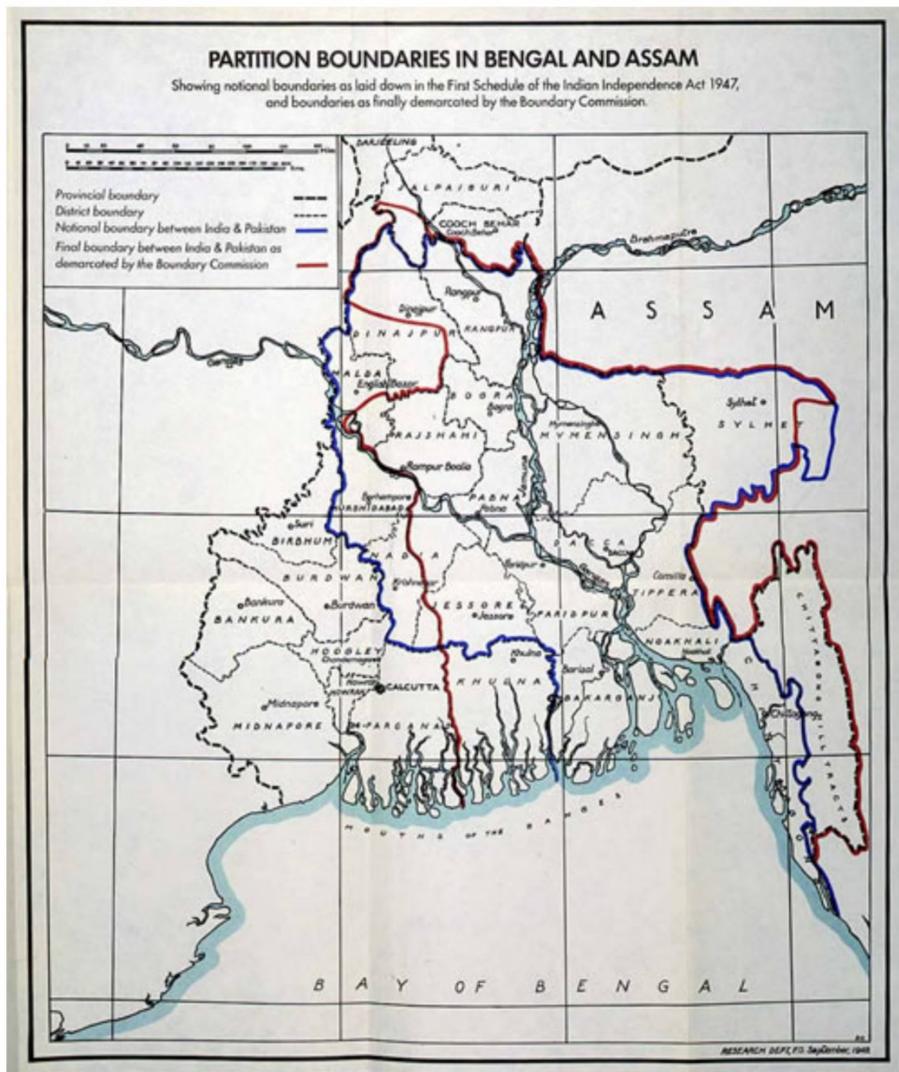
Joya had written at length about the Bengal Partition in her book *Bengal Divided* and explained how those who have worked on the Partition of Bengal,

had primarily focused on the Hindus—and that too chiefly on those from the upper and middle echelons of society. Poorer migrants and refugees, particularly Muslims, had not really been the focus of anyone's analysis, and those who were internally displaced were literally invisible, both in public records as well as scholarly articles. These groups of migrants remained within their region of origin, on either sides of the border and in enclaves or the ghettos of Kolkata, Dhaka, Chittagong, etc. their position still ambiguous and uncertain.

'Annu does the anthro bit, Claire does the socio and UK bit, and I do the history bit. For that you'd have to go to Bangladesh', concluded Joya.

I was up for it in a beat!

You can't grow up on either side of the Bengali border without thinking of the other. For the older generation, this was usually with nostalgia and resentment, for the younger generation, with curiosity and suspicion. Are they like us? How different are they? We had a Communist leader for the longest time and they have had generals



Partition boundaries in Bengal and Assam - (From 'India, the transfer of power 1942-47', Vol. XII, 8 July-15 August 1947, OIR 354.54P)



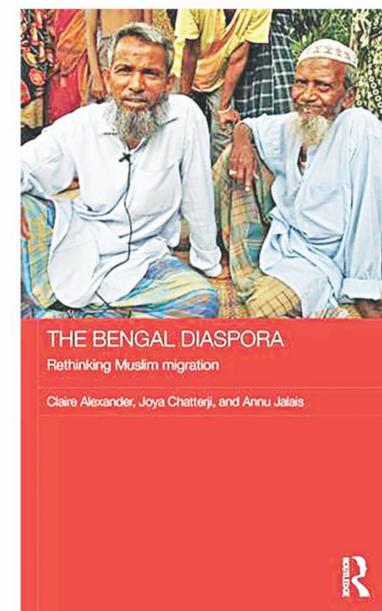
PHOTO: ANNU JALAIS

Gazi looking at his 90-year-old brother's picture (I returned to show him his brother's picture) and introducing him to his family.

replacing each other—sometimes pretty bloodily. Are they really Bengali or are they really more Hindu/Muslim?

As a BA student I had travelled to Bangladesh to work on Bhaoaiya and Bhatiyali songs in what then seemed long ago. I had, for this purpose, also travelled to northern West Bengal and Assam. On both sides of the border, my interlocutors' biggest concern was that my parents had let me travel, on my own, to this 'foreign land'. Those I met, in their concern, often took me under their wing and decided to accompany me to meet people they thought I should interview. I remembered a few happy weeks. This had been in 1996.

Fast forward to 2006 and the funding for our project had come through—generously provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. I was soon returning to this country, except that now, in 2007, I had lived in London for 10 years and had very supportive friends who introduced me to their



extended family and friends in Bangladesh. I was flying to Bangladesh inspired by this group of friends who were linked to *Drishtipat*, an online portal on human rights, and they ensured that my second arrival in Bangladesh felt like a sort of homecoming. And yet, because we had not learnt and lived history in the same way, Bangladesh often felt very alien too.

'So what is your work about?' I would be asked.

'It is about Partition refugees from India.' I would reply.

'You must be working on the Biharis then,' would come the quick response.

'Some, yes. But the majority of refugees were Bengalis, so I'm

mainly working on Bengalis who came from 'the other side.'

A lot of the time I was met with disbelief.

'But they came from India, they must be Biharis,' my interlocutors would insist.

'Most Indian refugees to East Pakistan were