

AIBS Fellowship Final Report
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From April 2019-June 2019 I conducted three months of fieldwork for my PhD in cultural anthropology with the support of an American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) junior fellowship. My AIBS research was an oral history project with refugees and migrants from East Bengal to the Sundarbans islands of West Bengal, India. The research was a part of my broader dissertation, which is an ethnographic and historical examination of environment and identity in the Sundarbans delta. During my fieldwork, I came to focus on water. In my dissertation, I explore how water – e.g., rivers, creeks, groundwater – is culturally constructed by local residents and how these meanings are changing as a result of development initiatives, new water infrastructures, and the effects of climate change.

My dissertation research involved more than 200 interviews and oral histories with local residents, as well as sustained participant observation in family settings, at religious events, and at a local NGO. My interlocutors belong to different social and ethnic groups originally from East Bengal, Medinipur, Jharkhand, and other parts of West Bengal. Most are members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and underrepresented religious groups, such as Muslims and Christians. For the AIBS project, I completed oral history interviews with 30 East Bengali refugees, migrants, and their descendants. Sixteen of the East Bengali research participants were male, and fourteen were female. Their ancestral homes in present-day Bangladesh include the districts of Khulna, Jessore, Barisal, and Noakhali. The majority belong to low-caste groups (Namasudra, Pundra). All identified as Hindu, and a few also belong to the Matua Mahasangha.

Migration from East Bengal began prior to Independence and Partition and continues to the present day. Most of my interlocutors came as refugees in the aftermath of Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In fact, the island where I work was also a site for a state-sponsored refugee resettlement and rehabilitation scheme. Some interviewees had also spent time in refugee camps in other parts of India prior to their arrival in the Sundarbans. Tracts of forested land were distributed to families on the south of the island, but in other areas other migrants and refugees settled themselves. The migration and rehabilitation programs were linked with the politics of the Left Front at the time. Because of their relatively recent arrival, some of my interlocutors had first-hand experience clearing forested tracts and were able to describe these transformations in detail. I benefitted immensely from these narratives, since one of my areas of my focus was the relation to space/place and environment. It was also productive to observe the differences between East Bengalis and other groups on the island where I worked, particularly in terms of religion, ritual, and present-day migration patterns.

In conclusion, my AIBS-funded research addresses histories of migration and displacement that have until now received little attention from scholars. It centers the experiences of subaltern refugee groups in the Sundarbans, who have had to simultaneously adapt to a new nation-state and an inhospitable frontier environment. Ultimately, my research will help shed light on the links between memory, migration, and environment in the delta, with particular focus on East Bengali Hindu identities. In this way, it will contribute to my dissertation research as well as to the field of Bangladesh studies more broadly.