

**Dr Joya Chatterjee**

**The Bengal Diaspora: Bengali Settlers in South Asia and Britain: a Comparative and Interdisciplinary Study  
End of Year Report for 2007**

The first year has been primarily concerned with completing the initial statistical profile of Bengali Muslim migrants in South Asia and Great Britain, the compilation of complete bibliographies, and the drafting of a literature review. From this initial groundwork, the project team was able to identify useful and comparable fieldsites in India, Bangladesh and Britain. The sites identified in South Asia are: the 'Town Hall' Bihari settlement in Dhaka, Park Circus in Kolkata, the Sundarbans and the border area of Kaliachak. The fieldsites in the UK will be Tower Hamlets, Newham, Oldham and networks of brides and restaurant workers (to mirror aspects of the 'border' regions of the South Asia sites).

With fieldsites identified, the project team was able to refine the methodological parameters of the sociological/anthropological data collection, and draw up interview schedules. It was decided to conduct the life history data on two levels: firstly, through household mapping of 30 migrant families in each fieldsite to allow for broader migration patterns and histories to emerge, and secondly, through in-depth, life history oral narratives with 5-7 key informants in each area. Visual and document materials will also be gathered in each site. Visits by Dr Chatterji and Dr Jalais to India and Bangladesh enabled the identification of initial contacts, potential respondents and relevant archives, while ongoing engagement with British Bangladeshi community and cultural events by all members of the project team has also provided fruitful links and avenues of access.

Contact has been made and developed with organisations in London such as the Brick Lane Circle Seminar, Swadhinata Trust, Network Bangla, Drishtipat amongst others. In India, Dr Chatterji was able to discuss the project with the key members of the Institute of Objective Studies and the Minorities Council, and both organisations provided (and we hope will continue to provide) valuable information and support to the Project. Dr Jalais, who is presently undertaking field research in Dhaka, has met several times with NGOs and other stakeholders, including Nijera Korii, ADSC (Association for Development Support and Cooperation), and RIB (Research Initiatives Bangladesh) and RRMRU (Refugee Migratory Movement Research Unit).

**Highlights:**

Preliminary research has suggested a number of key lacuna in the understanding of the migration patterns and experiences of Bengali migrants within the Bengal Delta and to the United Kingdom. These are:

- Rather than a focus on *migration* as a once and for all transaction between sending and receiving societies, the focus should be on *movement* both across and within borders as a fluid, ongoing and open ended process. The focus on collective, individual and family mobility historically and in the contemporary setting suggests that, in interaction with changing structural constraints, migrants move more frequently

and more strategically than traditional migration models allow for, and that these shifts have consequences for the way migration and settlement is understood and experienced.

- Relatedly, there has been a dearth of research on contemporary forms of migration amongst the Bengali Muslim communities. The arrival of new migrants into established communities raises important questions about the interaction between new and old migrants and has consequences for settlement, cultural transmission and change, and identity formation.
- The role of gender in both old and new migrations has been under-researched. Preliminary work suggests that movement for/through marriage, and particularly the experience of brides, is a significant, but little understood form of migration experience.
- The political context of migration is constantly changing and, unsurprisingly, impacts dramatically on the forms and experience of movement. However, these changes are overlooked in favour of reductive understandings of economic or forced migration, and our work suggests the need for a more nuanced account of the conditions in which movement takes place within a seemingly bounded community.
- The research points to the value of an interdisciplinary approach understanding the complexities of historical and contemporary migrations, and has raised provocative and insightful questions in the design of the research – for example the intersection of issues of authorship, voice and sensitivity to issues of historical method in the design of the interview schedule.