



River Life

and the

Upspring of Nature



NAVEEDA KHAN

River Life
and the
Upspring of Nature

BUY

River Life
and the
Upspring of Nature

NAVEEDA KHAN



DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2023

© 2023 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Lisa Lawley

Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher

Typeset in Literata TT by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Khan, Naveeda Ahmed, [date] author.

Title: River life and the upspring of nature / Naveeda Khan.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022029323 (print)

LCCN 2022029324 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478019398 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478016731 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478024002 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Human ecology—Bangladesh—Jamuna River. |

Rural poor—Bangladesh—Jamuna River. | Sand bars—

Bangladesh—Jamuna River. | River settlements—Bangladesh—

Jamuna River. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Anthropology /

Cultural & Social | NATURE / Ecosystems & Habitats / Rivers

Classification: LCC GF696.B3 K436 2023 (print) | LCC GF696.B3

(ebook) | DDC 304.2086/942095492—dc23/eng20221003

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022029323>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022029324>

Cover art: Cyanotype print by Munem Wasif, from the series

Seeds Shall Set Us Free, 2017–19. © Munem Wasif / Agence VU'.



For Shafique and Suli

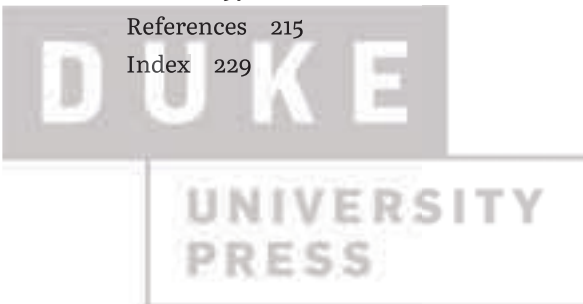


CONTENTS

List of Maps	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii

INTRODUCTION. <i>River Life and Death</i>	1
1. <i>Moving Lands in the Skein of Property and Kin Relations</i>	28
2. <i>History and Morality between Floods and Erosion</i>	59
3. <i>Elections on Sandbars and the Remembered Village</i>	94
4. <i>Decay of the River and of Memory</i>	131
5. <i>Death of Children and the Eruption of Myths</i>	160
EPILOGUE. <i>The Chars in Recent Years</i>	191

Notes	197
References	215
Index	229



MAPS

Map 1. Divisional map of Bangladesh xix

Map 2. District map of Sirajganj xx

Map 3. Satellite image of Chauhali xxi

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

PREFACE

Winter 2010 found me in Bangladesh thinking about my next research project. After two decades of work on Pakistan, I was finally ready to do something closer to home. On a visit with my father to his village home in Manikganj, just a bit northeast of Dhaka, the capital city, we reached Aricha, a ferry terminal that routinely transported cars, buses, people, and animals across and up and down the Padma River. I looked on in shock at what lay in front of me. Used to a roaring river in my youth with ferryboats tentatively traversing it, I now saw a huge sand dune between the two banks and extending into both reaches of the river. A thin crack of water served as the passage-way for the ferryboats, which now looked large and lugubrious to my eyes. My father, a soil scientist and ever my teacher, explained the hydrology of the river system in Bangladesh that led to the rivers being both destroyers and creators of land. While he marveled at this machine of nature, he said that the soil was too unstructured to be useful as roads, thus necessitating the ferryboats. However, he waxed poetic at the fertile quality of the soil, pointing out the rice paddies growing along the river's edges, likely planted by nearby villagers who would later transplant them elsewhere.

Used as I was to hearing about how Bangladesh was in the eye of the climate storm and stood to lose 25 percent of its landmass within a few decades to rising ocean waters, I was struck by this physical evidence of a

D
U
K
E

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

countertendency within the landscape, and by the ready absorption of what the river threw up into the rhythms of everyday life. This was how I came to find my next research topic. I decided to study how people made lives for themselves alongside capricious rivers, specifically the Brahmaputra-Jamuna River, and the ever-shifting land that the river provided and whose status as a curse or a boon was never certain.

I decided to try to understand how the physical volatility of the riverine landscape was absorbed into the sinews of the social. The colonial and postcolonial history and political economy of Bangladesh went a long way in helping me to see how ragtag communities of itinerant farmers and fishermen came to be in these locations and to be economically vulnerable in very particular ways. I also found much, from gestures and feelings to sudden organization into patterned behavior as a group to flashes of intuition and senses of invisible forces, that could not be explained through the usual analytic frameworks. Although sometimes attributed to the omniscient presence of the divine through the language of the theological, very often such excess was referenced as simply a lure, an invitation, a pulse, or a presence, sometimes within oneself as much as an external cue.

This book is about giving an adequate description of this existence, without claiming for it the status of settled sociality. It is also about learning to ascribe authority to nature as one of the forces at play within this mode of existence, without allowing this to mean only the physical landscape and the human and nonhuman animals living in it. And it is about acknowledging that we still have to contend with nature both as concept and as alive in the world, or rather as concept precisely because it is alive in the world.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After I finished my first book (which took ages), I thought the next one would surely be easier because I now knew what the process involved. Little did I know that I would be changing not just my field site but also my focus, requiring me to seek out a second education almost the length of my doctoral training in order to research and write this book. For my new interest in riverine society I have first and foremost to thank my father, Shafique Khan, who inspired me to look at the riverine landscape through his eyes, to see his youthful escapades and subsequent travels as tied to the movements of the rivers that crisscross Bangladesh. I have countless memories of us making river crossings by ferry, of him pointing out sites, trees, and plants familiar to him, while he placated us children with snacks from the vendors who thronged the ferry ghats. So perhaps it wasn't so unexpected that I would find myself drawn to the same landscapes when it came time to dream up a new project.

I thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, and the American Philosophical Society for providing funding for the first stretch of my research dating back to 2010. This was followed by generous funding by the Andrew Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellowship and the Johns Hopkins University Catalyst Fellowship, both of which afforded me the time and opportunity to study and learn to appreciate the

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

rivers through the eyes of hydrologists, climate scientists, and German Romantic philosophers, and to return for repeat stints of fieldwork. I thank Peter Wilcock, Ciaran Harman, and Erica Schoenberger from the JHU Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, Ben Zaitchik and Darryn Waugh from the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, and Eckart Förster of the Department of Philosophy for generously educating a colleague. While the earth and all its forces came into focus as I took STEM classes, I acquired an entirely new appreciation for the human as a modest mediator of such a vision of earth. This happened by way of an education in German idealism I received from Eckart over almost three years of coursework shoehorned into semesters in which I acted as both teacher and student. I owe a huge intellectual debt to him. I thank Jane Guyer, then the chair of the Department of Anthropology, for supporting me in this educational venture and my colleagues in the department for accommodating my leave.

Tahera Yasmin—Tulie *apa* to those of us who grew up with her as an affectionate, teasing, sisterly presence—introduced me to Habibullah Bahar, director of the nongovernmental organization Manob Mukti Sangstha (MMS), who warmly incorporated me into his life and that of his lovely family and facilitated my introduction to the Sirajganj *chars*, as the sandbars in the river were called, which came to be my home. I cannot thank Habib bhai and those who make up MMS enough for all the hospitality and care they have showered on me. Habib bhai's musings reverberate throughout the chapters. I appreciated very much MMS's sharing of Shohidul Islam; Shohidul came on as my research assistant but soon became friend and interlocutor. He and Mosarouf Hosain provided much-needed help in conducting surveys. Eventually, Shohidul *bhai* (brother), Kohinoor *apa* (sister), and Salaam bhai made up my small research team and family, with whom I spent countless wonderful hours in Dokhin Teguri walking about, shopping, boating, fishing, chasing chickens, cooking, and doing whatever else needed to be done to make daily sustenance possible.

I am not sure how to begin thanking the people in the *chars* who went from first treating me as very precious as a potential donor to their many life projects to giving up and impatiently folding me into their bosoms instead. I have rarely enjoyed such exquisite company and conversation as I had with *chauras*, as those who live on *chars* are sometimes called, and what I have learned from them could fill many books. I won't name them individually here, since this would require many pages, but instead point out that they are named in the chapters ahead as they asked that I use their actual names

instead of pseudonyms. Their names will keep bursting forth from me for a long time to come.

The writing of this book has been a slow, iterative process through which I have had to learn to control my urge to speak to too many audiences at once. My editor, Ken Wissoker, and two anonymous reviewers have been patient and sure guides in making this book more honed and readable while helping me to clarify my stakes to better uphold my ambitions. I am very grateful for their guidance and their trust in my work. Lisa Lawley was a terrific editorial manager, shepherding the manuscript through the entirety of the process.

My constant companions through this writing process have been Andrew Brandel, Swayam Bagaria, Bhriugu Singh, and Sharika Thirananagama, the four most knowledgeable and generous friends one could hope for. Andrew was the first to introduce me to the strain of *Naturphilosophie* within German idealism, which I refer to in the book through the figure of Schelling, and he continues to impress on me the importance of literature for anthropology. Swayam, Bhriugu, and Sharika have been both perceptive and incisive in their comments on countless versions of my writing. My long-standing engagement and conversation with Veena Das, through her work and in the courses we have taught together on how Hindu and Islamic thought put pressure on anthropological concepts, are evident in many parts of this book. I am deeply grateful for her friendship and that of Ranen Das.

I thank, too, my colleagues Tom Özden-Schilling, Canay Özden-Schilling, and Michael Degani, who generously read and provided comments on an early version of the manuscript; Rochelle Tobias, my terrifically brave colleague and friend in German languages and literature, who jumped into the ethnography while checking my exposition of Schelling; and my former student and now colleague Vaibhav Saria, who generously read and edited the final version of the manuscript and whose encouragement has often lifted my spirits. Former and current graduate students who have read and provided helpful feedback on parts of the book include Nat Adams, Burge Abiral, Ghazal Asif, Sruti Chaganti, Amrita Ibrahim, Kunal Joshi, Sanaulah Khan, Perry Maddox, Sid Maunaguru, Basab Mullik, Sumin Myung, Maya Ratnam, Aditi Saraf, Megha Sehdev, Chitra Venkataramani, and Anna Wherry. I learn and grow so much through my engagement with students that it is hard to think of this book outside of our ongoing conversations. Friends and interlocutors at Hopkins include Jane Bennett, Bill Connolly, Debbie Poole (now retired), and Todd Shepard, for whose intellectual and political vibrancy I am very grateful.

Many friends and colleagues have provided ample opportunities over the past ten years to present my work at various phases or have given generously of their time in helpful conversations and intellectual nourishment. They include Vincanne Adams, Kamran Asdar Ali, Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, Ulka Anjaria, Andrea Ballesterio, Anna Bigelow, Dominic Boyer, Nils Bubandt, Iftikhar Dadi, Naisargi Dave, Maura Finkelstein, Karen Gagne, David Gilmartin, Ann Gold, Suzanne Guerlac, Akhil Gupta, Charlie Hal-lisey, Thomas Blom Hansen, Stefan Helmreich, Nathan Hensley, Cymene Howe, Robin Jeffry, Arthur Kleinman, Franz Krause, Sarah Lamb, Stephanie LeMenager, Dana Luciano, Purnima Mankekar, Setrag Manoukian, Andrew Matthews, Stuart McLean, Diane Nelson, Ben Orlove, Katrin Pahl, Priti Ramamurthy, Mattias Borg Rasmussen, Mubbashir Rizvi, Liz Roberts, Lotte Segal, Martha Ann Selby, Harris Solomon, Anna Tsing, Bharat Venkat, Ara Wilson, and Vazira Zamindar. I befriended Kate Brown and Danilyn Rutherford at a workshop and Anant Maringanti at another; they have been the best finds. Scholars of Bangladesh—all friends and fellow travelers who are my spur to ensuring that my contributions to the scholarship on the country are as rigorous and critical as they are sympathetic—are Tariq Ali, Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, Jason Cons, Lotte Hoek, Iftekhar Iqbal, David Ludden, Naeem Mohaiemen, Kasia Paprocki, Ali Riaz, Elora Shehabuddin, Dina Siddiqi, Tony Stewart, and Willem van Schendel. I have enjoyed being in conversation with Seuty Saber and Samia Huq over emergent issues of anthropological concern in Bangladesh, while Firdous Azim, Fazlul Haque Majumdar (aka Ripon bhai), and Saymon Zakaria have opened up aspects of the Bengali literary, poetic, and folk for me through their preoccupations. Chapter 5 was previously published as “Living Paradox in Riverine Bangladesh: Whiteheadian Perspectives on Ganga Devi and Khwaja Khijir” in *Anthropologica*. I thank the journal for allowing me to use the ethnographic material.

Looking homeward, I have loved being able to adda with my childhood friends Aleeze Moss, Dina Hossain, Lopita Huq, Lamiya Morshed, Seema Karim, and my fabulous sisters, Shaila and Sabina, who are nonplussed by what I do but are nonetheless my biggest cheerleaders. The pleasure of being able to go between my home in the chars and the joyful home of my parents, Munawar and Shafique, and my brother, Shahed, and sister-in-law, Rumana, in Dhaka, after such a long stretch of living outside of Bangladesh has made this fieldwork more special than anything I have done or will do. Finally, all credit for this work lies with my resilient children, Sophie

and Suli, who bore my absence during long stretches of fieldwork with heroic stoicism, and my wonderful husband, Bob, without whose support I doubt I would know what it is to be a scholar in my own right. If there is anything that these past few years of political turmoil have taught me, it is that we cannot take any advances on rights for granted, and that it takes many people to make one person's journey a success. As Jane Guyer would say, I am rich in people.





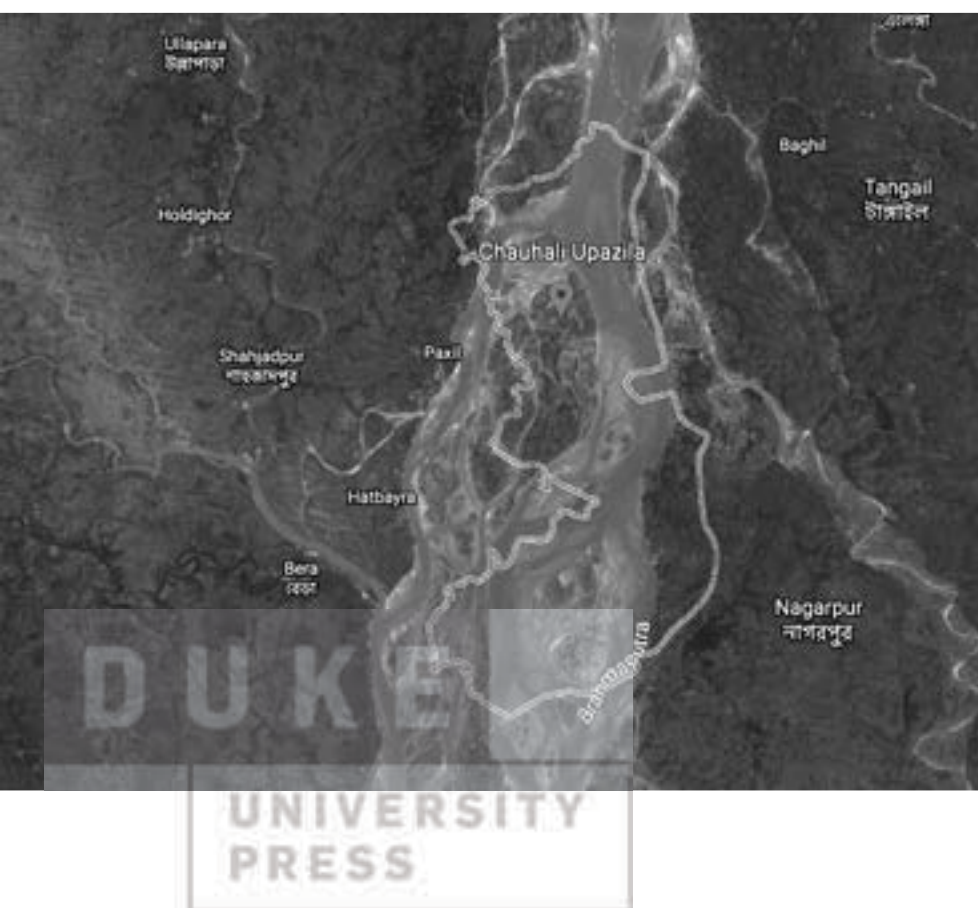
Map 1. Divisional map of Bangladesh.
Source: author created.



Map 2. District map of Sirajganj.

Source: author created.

Map 3. Satellite image of Chauhali.
Source: Google Earth.



INTRODUCTION.

River Life and Death

THE JAMUNA RIVER ORIGINATES IN TIBET as the Tsangpo; breaks through the Himalayan mountain range in great gorges into Arunchal Pradesh, India, where it is known as the Diang; flows southwest through Assam as the Brahmaputra and enters Bangladesh through the north as the Jamuna, whereupon it first merges with the Teesta River; and then merges with the Padma River and finally with the Meghna River before emptying into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Again and again I heard that this was a complicated river system and not only because it flowed across so many contentious nation-states and served as the drainage system for an area of 583,000 square kilometers. Its complexity further derived from the fact that its sediment load and the low slope of the Bengal Delta made it a braided river (Coleman 1960; Best et al. 2007; N. M. Islam 2010). In other words, it was not a river with a definite channel and a forceful flow. It was made up of many subchannels, or braids, that scuttled indecisively back and forth across the landscape even as the water in them was pulled inexorably by the tides of the Indian Ocean. While the braids added considerable variability across the Jamuna's length and breadth, snowmelt and monsoon rains also made the river widen and contract seasonally between 3 and 10 kilometers, in some places reaching 20 kilometers, and occasionally changed its nature

D
U
K
E

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

to have a more decisive flow, overspill as floods, and channel migration through literally leaping over to another location in a process called avulsion (Sarker et al. 2014). The most interesting element of the system to those who study such phenomena was that the river transported a heavy load of sediment that it deposited wherever the water lost its force of will to carry its load, which was usually downriver, creating land along the banks and in the center of the river. Just as often, if not more so, the river, through its increased volume of water, acceleration, or overspill, eroded the very land that it produced. For those who lived downriver, the river, thus, became the giver and taker of land (Sarker, Huque, and Alam 2003; de Wilde 2011).

In 2011, I entered life on the delta at the location in the Jamuna River between the districts of Sirajganj and Tangail, known for its high rates of accretion and erosion (Bangladesh Water Development Board 2010), to study the lives of those who lived on the chars. Those living on the mainland used the term *chaura* as a derisive label for them, but those living on chars took up the term with amused alacrity, referring to themselves as *chaura manush*, or people of the chars. Although of Bengali ethnicity, *chauras* came from diverse lineages and occupied many different communities within the villages on the chars. They were neither entirely homogeneous nor quite as motley as mainlanders made them out to be, as will become evident over the course of this book. I decided to use the term *chauras* interchangeably with *char* dwellers to indicate this population whose backgrounds and behavior were within a given range of variation, as well as to indicate an existence that carried the sting of mainstream judgment.¹

During my very first visit I was quickly alerted to the fact that chars held an illusory quality, even for *chauras*. From the boat approaching island chars, it took many rotations of the head and shifting of the body to tell apart the glimmering water from the onset of land with its reflective sandy surface, which lay flush with the water. Within a few months of living on a char, I became attuned to the fact that the village where I was staying was perhaps in its fifth incarnation. As I walked across the sandy stretches that separated one village from another to reach the bank from which to take the boat to the mainland, I was told by my walking companion that movement was easier when one could take a boat directly from an earlier version of our village to the mainland, that the newest version of the village was very inconveniently located vis-à-vis the mainland. In other words, the rainy season alone did not determine whether one walked or boated to the mainland; the changing location and surrounding topography of the village did as

well. That many past emanations of the village were intermingled with the present was repeatedly made clear to me through gestures toward physical locations that had held excellent fruit trees several versions of the village ago, or toward lowland that had once been ideal for cultivation but returned as upraised land better suited for settlement. Many pasts pressed upon the present. And every action undertaken in the present had many future possibilities built into it. One of my closest interlocutors once described how she planned her home garden so that, should it rain, the seeds she had planted near her house would grow into trees, but should it flood, the floodwaters would transport her seeds to the pit that she had dug close to the house for such an event, and should the land break, she would scoop out the young stalks to take with her to wherever she went next.

Chauras lived in a conditional mode, with many “if this, then that” scenarios crowding their daily life and future horizons. The issue of the interrelation between chauras and variable temporal horizons takes on urgency in the era of global climate change, when overwhelming evidence suggests that human activity is forcing changes to the many processes that produce the global climate. This has consequences not just for daily weather and seasonal variation but also for ocean waters that are considered to be acidifying and rising, which, along with glacier melt, could have potentially catastrophic results for a low-lying deltaic country such as Bangladesh. While rising ocean waters threatened to inundate Bangladesh’s coastal lands, its river pathways threatened to carry salt water up-country (Mirza, Warrick, and Ericksen 2003; Al Faruque and Khan 2013; Gain et al. 2013; Brammer 2014).

At the same time, the precise impact of climate change is hard to pin down in a physically dynamic system such as the Jamuna River (T. Islam and Neelim 2010). For one thing, the river in its current configuration is the reverberation of the events of past earthquakes in the lower reaches of the eastern Himalayas (Sarker and Thorne 2006). The last earthquake in 1950 in Assam, an Indian state due north of Bangladesh, caused entire mountains to shake and collapse, producing a tremendous pileup of sediment blocking all waterways. In response, the Jamuna widened, deepened, and proliferated its branches to carry the sediment downstream. The river was only doing what it was created to do, for it was another such earthquake in the late eighteenth century that had abruptly shifted the Jamuna’s course southward from its earlier circumscribed and leisurely route northwest. And should there be no more earthquakes, then the river could simply

run its course once the sediment buildup from the 1950 seismic event has been transported. The river is a trace of a geological event coming to an end.

In effect, the chauras were caught in the conjunction of two temporal sequences, one from the past with the river as the reverberation of earthquakes and the second from the future as the ocean with its rising waters—warm, salinic, and acidic—is slated to enter the river system.² The likelihood that the sediment transport could decisively cease, thereby stopping the engine of the river, or that ocean waters could reach the upper reaches of the river, puts into question the very viability of chars. This situation allows us to speculate that the chauras were living a form of life that was likely coming to an end.

Chauras in Context

The district of Sirajganj was no more than eighty miles outside of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Yet to reach my field site took upward of five hours, as I had to take a train to Sirajganj Town, then catch a ride to the riverbank closest to the char where I stayed, then a boat across to the bank closest to the mainland, rounded out by a motorbike ride over sandy dunes, shallow rivers, and frail upraised pathways between cultivated fields to arrive at the field office of the NGO Manob Mukti Sangstha (MMS) or the Organization for the Freedom of Humanity suboffice where I was provided a room of my own. The bank on both sides of the char kept changing, and so my point of departure and arrival kept changing until finally I realized it was best for everyone when there was water everywhere because then we could travel by boat. But this was not to be as Sirajganj was constantly undergoing repair to secure the buttresses holding back the water.

Sirajganj first emerged out of the waters as land accreted to zamindari (landed gentry) properties in 1884 in colonial India and only became a district in 1984 in independent Bangladesh. It was administrative will that had deemed Sirajganj would be a district as it had a frail spatial existence with no fewer than five main rivers and numerous branches across nine *upazilas*, or subdistricts, all of which were once char lands or were in the process of becoming chars. Once part of the isolated and impoverished northern half of Bangladesh, Sirajganj became better integrated into the country after the construction of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge between 1994 and 1998. Due to budgetary constraints, the bridge was not made as wide as it needed to be,

necessitating ongoing infrastructural repair and river training to keep the water flowing under the bridge. One such effort has been to shore up Shirajganj shodor, or the town of Sirajganj, which had once been a flourishing site of the jute industry in colonial India but was abandoned once the river around it became too silted to allow the passage of boats. But since that time the river had changed course, leading the town to be ravaged repeatedly by it. Securing the bridge meant securing the town, which meant building a hard point, a short stone dike used to stabilize river banks, along the river's eastern bank between 1995 and 1999 to stay river erosion. The hard point had been compromised numerous times starting in 2009.

Between 2011 and 2017, I lived and worked intermittently in one of the larger chars in Chauhali subdivision due south of the Sirajganj Town hard point and the Jamuna Bridge. Although these were the very chars faulted for causing trouble for both the town and the bridge, it was nearly impossible to imagine how they could be scoured out of existence because they not only were massive in scale but also held large populations. The island on which I worked was wedged in a branch of the Jamuna River between Sirajganj and Tangail, its neighboring district. It was ten square miles in area and housed no fewer than ten villages with anywhere between 50 and 250 households each, with each household of an average size of five to seven people. The government just let the chars be with no effort to remove them but with also no effort to strengthen them to withstand the river or provide basic services to their inhabitants. When char dwellers said they lived in "the remote" (using the English word), they did not mean at a great physical distance from the center of government, because Sirajganj Town was close to Dhaka. They referred to a sense of remoteness produced of neglect by the central and district government, apparent in the lack of electricity, roads, and schools, the three major markers of development evident elsewhere in the country.

Living in the shadow of major infrastructural projects, which chauras neither condemned as the Jamuna Bridge had brought economic prosperity to the previously isolated Sirajganj nor condoned as these projects, however desultorily, sought the demise of chaura lives and land, they made the best of what they had with little expectation of government help. Rather, family, village, and political ties had to be maintained and thickened to the extent possible to tug on as situations arose. And situations arose quite often, as chars alternately faced deluges and droughts, with large chunks of land eroding into the river.

Early in my fieldwork, I chose three villages on the island, on different topography and at different stages in the process of erosion and accretion, to get closer to the grain of the chaura everyday. The village of Dokhin Teguri, or South Teguri, had been around the longest, having emerged after the floods of 1988, and was still going strong in 2011. This long duration was unusual for a char village, secured no doubt by the bridge immediately upriver. The village had birthed a generation of children who had never experienced river erosion and who thought of themselves as living on *qayem*, or established land, while living in the middle of an erosive river. I was interested in how this sense of durability and permanence was maintained in the face of its history and likely future. This village served as my home in the chars.

Rihayi Kawliya, or Mercy on Kawliya, the second village I studied, was almost gone, eroded by the river. Only a mosque and a few households remained, but those who lived near it on borrowed and rented land from adjoining villages spoke as if Rihayi Kawliya were still there around them, while the majority of their co-villagers who now lived on the other side of the river in Khas Dholayi in the district of Tangail persisted in saying that they too lived in Rihayi Kawliya. While the actual village of Rihayi Kawliya might have gone, it existed virtually on both sides of the river, and it was this village in absentia that I studied to understand the work that went into keeping it present and making its presence count.

The third of my village sites was a new wing of the village of Boro Gorjan, or the Big Roar, composed of those who had taken the boat over posthaste from a nearby subdistrict as three villages in that area collapsed into the river. In the initial stages of their settlement the area was called Hotath Para, or Sudden Neighborhood, to indicate the suddenness with which it had gone up. The inhabitants of Hotath Para, later renamed Kuwait Para, lived cheek by jowl, facing inward into their households with their backs resolutely to the riverbank. With their villages gone, they had to forge a precarious sociality among strangers, perhaps similar to the country of Kuwait that is home to many migrant laborers, while banking on a future when their lands would return.

At one time, in the colonial and more recent postcolonial past, the char dwellers were considered an untrustworthy, rootless people (Baqee 1998). It was as if their character was a direct reflection of their lands, which broke and re-formed with such regularity and intensity as to leave the soil churning in the waters to be watched by the elderly who congregated along the

riverbanks during the evenings. This continual movement of land and people kept the British colonial land laws in the nineteenth century in a state of constant amendment until such point that the settlement officers declared, “We think it impossible to lay down any fixed laws for a shifting sand,” and the colonial government decided to survey and settle only those char areas not of “a fluctuating nature” (Hill 1997, 47). In the fluctuating areas, no records of rights were to be published, and no settlement of revenues or rents was to be made. This left chars in an indeterminate legal state that continued through the partition of 1947, the period of East Pakistan between 1947 and 1971, and into contemporary Bangladesh, resulting in the endemic violence and fraught sociality that marked char life (I. Iqbal 2010).

It was also the movement of chars and their indeterminate legality that made them home to one of the longest-standing peasant rebellions against the colonial government in the nineteenth century, the Fairazi Movement (I. Iqbal 2010). The rebels relied on the relative lack of presence of the colonial state in chars to sustain and organize themselves. The waterways served as their means of movement and communication. The Fairazi imagination of an egalitarian community with equal rights to the land derived not only from peasant interpretations of the tenets of Islam but also from the nature of chars to form and re-form, producing the effect of a *tabula rasa*, the chance to start afresh. Chars eroding decisively and accreting equally dramatically helped sustain the imagination of divine will independent of human will but also sympathetic to human rebellion against oppression, insofar as chars lent themselves to organizing outside of the surveillance of the British colonial state. It was not uncommon for Fairazi revolutionary pamphlets to point to rains turning into deluges in these parts to the detriment of British authorities and zamindars as divinely ordained punishment.

In postcolonial Bangladesh, with land settlement stalled at present in acknowledgment of the difficulties of fixing land in these parts and of controlling illegal activity monitored by the state, the national newspapers and development agencies had moved away from describing the char dwellers as inherently shiftless to portraying them as among the 24 percent of hardcore poor in Bangladesh (see, for instance, Brocklesby and Hobley 2003). They came into particular focus during natural disasters, portrayed either as fatalist for ascribing their condition and misfortunes to Allah’s will or as resilient against the elements (Indra 2000; Schmuck-Widmann 2000, 2001). Yet attention to *chaura* speech suggested that they were not quite either, that

there was a specific mode of engagement that neither railed against nor was passive in the face of natural disasters. For instance, although they accepted the inevitability of natural disasters as an erratic element in the world, in the aftermath of these events, the char dwellers sought to reinsert themselves into their physical surroundings—for instance, by pulling their houses to higher ground, searching out seeds to plant within a given time, or dragging weaving machines to a dry location to meet a deadline for a shipment of woven cloth. In other words, they let the erratic quality of disasters buffet them and then worked to step into rhythm with the diurnal and the seasonal. And if nature was to be found in the chars in the many physical stirrings of matter, it was also to be found in the conjoining of such physical dynamism with receptivity and attentiveness toward the world to eke out repetition and regularity from it.

While it took work for the chaura everyday to acquire regularity and repetition, this tempo suggested neither a mastery over the physical surroundings nor something temporarily seized from the environs but rather a chaura mode of shifting grounds in relation to moving lands. In other words, the various social institutions and mores that constituted chaura lives evinced not only a flexibility to accommodate a wide range of circumstances and possibilities but also flexibility about the agreements that constituted the social. For instance, while strict apportioning of land by ownership held when villages were in their right places, when lands eroded or were newly up, everybody farmed collectively whatever land remained or any new land, sharing the proceeds according to how much labor was expended by each person. Or, for instance, when lands were secure, villages evinced a clear political hierarchy similar in nature to the villages in rural Bangladesh. But when the lands were no more, the households in their temporary locations operated entirely as individual sovereign units giving little to no credence to prior village leaders, as now they held the same status. While the chauras maintained a strict standard for women's privacy in their households, when their village was no more, it was as though keeping purdah was inconsequential. Women and men went about their business of securing livelihoods and making do while living by the roadside until their lands reemerged or they found new land on which to put up their households. It wasn't merely the case that circumstances constrained or even prevented char dwellers from assuming the conventions that usually shored them up as a social group; rather, different understandings of ownership, labor, hierarchy, and gendered norms held for different circumstances.³

The Upspring of Nature

These multiple temporal horizons, shifting grounds, and disparate agreements that made up chaura lives led me to study how moving lands did not simply detract from but in fact enabled a chaura mode of existence. Yet I was unhappy by how often I was read as saying that the landscape forged this form of life, as if there were a simple relationship between the landscape and chaura lives, with the landscape providing the external determinants for chaura experience. This was the kind of naive materialism that could lead to geographic determinism and the racialization of place that the best of anthropology was leery of and had led it to maintain a sharp distinction between nature and culture. This formulation also seemed to miss the fact that while the moving lands indeed forced the chauras to live under very difficult circumstances, the chauras were also drawn to this moving quality of land with its inherent promises and threats. The physical dynamism allowed the flourishing of different imaginations, norms, and even ideals among the char dwellers.

I understood the join between landscape and people, nature and culture, a bit differently, taking it to be more intimate. It is the claim of this book that chaura lives are configured by nature, that nature makes persons and cultures in this place, as it likely does in every place, but one sees the productivity of nature more clearly here. While we have long acknowledged that nature provides the material conditions for existence and informs corporeal life and embodiment, it has only ever been thought of as an external spur. My argument is that nature is more internal than external, more subject than object, and serves as the ground and possibility for human subjectivity, thought, and culture.

There are weak and strong versions of this view of nature. Just as we have come to think of the nation-state or the free market as abstract entities with distinct histories, existence as ideas, and material effects, the weaker version maintains the same for nature. R. G. Collingwood (1960) and Pierre Hadot (2006) have tracked the idea of nature, while Philippe Descola (2013a, 2013b) has shown how this version of nature has acquired the status of ontology. Just as the nation-state may produce feelings of belonging and capitalism may constitute us as desiring beings, so too do ideas of nature produce us as particular kinds of persons, to be explored over the course of this book.

The stronger version of this view of nature, which I pursue in the book, claims that although it is available for human observation, seen as intrinsic

and necessary for human existence, and theologized or anthropomorphized in turn by humans, nature is unconditioned. As a force, tendency, or orientation, nature actualizes itself within the human mind, body, and modes of existence but remains alien and enigmatic in the sense of being exterior to human cognition and indifferent to human will and desire.

We may get a contrary perspective from Bangladesh studies, which urges us to focus on the specificities of state-society relations in Bangladesh in shaping *chaura* realities. Or anthropologists may protest, having long battled other disciplines for making simplistic and even dangerous statements about how culture is an adaptive response to the needs of physical survival and biological self-perpetuation. I take up each of these perspectives in turn to draw out their merits for thickening our descriptions of chars, but also to show how none fully suffices at acknowledging nature within our accounts of the diverse modes of existence that I find in *chaura* lives and articulations.

While here I don't rehearse the entire field of Bangladesh studies (see N. Khan 2015), two trends are particularly relevant with respect to framing the lives of char dwellers. The first has to do with the historical formation of Bangladesh as a nation-state and the issues that ensue from that. The second entangles char dwellers through the focus on development as the dominant paradigm by which the country crafts its future.

Unlike India and Pakistan, for which the partition of 1947 played an important role in shaping their respective histories and historiography, it was 1971, or the year Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan at the conclusion of a bloody war between the Pakistani army and Bengali liberation fighters, that constituted the founding event for Bangladesh (Riaz 2016). This event has been examined from many angles, from its roots in West Pakistan misgovernance of East Pakistan; to the successive suppression and commemoration of 1971 by Bangladesh's ever-changing governments, which largely oscillate between the two national parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Mookherjee 2007, 2015); to its paradoxical inheritance by the young, ranging from those who are committed to the secular principles that informed the country's early constitution to those who are more attracted to an Islamic ethos (N. S. Chowdhury 2019).

The chars and those who dwell on them were very much part of this national story due to the fact that these chars were part of the mainland during the 1970s and bore the brunt of the offensive on the countryside by the Pakistan army. Chauras recalled their suffering at the hands of the armed forces and the effects of West Pakistan's scorched-earth policy, with a number of

them describing their days as part of the guerrilla force fighting for liberation. The year 1971 and its aftermath, specifically the pains of reconstruction, the unfulfilled promise of land reform, the 1974 famine, the failure to try those who collaborated with Pakistan's army, the coups, and the continual tussle between the two national parties, reverberated through their lives (also see van Schendel 2009; Ali 2010).

Within this national story the chauras are rendered generic Bengalis who suffered Pakistani oppression and who now threw in their lot with the AL political party, viewed as committed to seeking justice that had been deferred after independence. While those living in these parts overwhelmingly supported AL, this story could not possibly encompass chaura memories or realities (N. Khan 2021b). After all, char dwellers lived not with one stable past but with many pasts of varying temporal depths pressing into their present. Furthermore, entities and events of greater age than the fifty-year-old state of Bangladesh moved through this mode of existence. There was little in the history of Bangladesh to accommodate the conditionality that informed chaura lives or the forces to which they gave expression. A disacknowledgment of these dimensions of chaura lives was also a suppression of the fact that the entirety of Bangladesh was geographically a char, an accretion on the landmass that constitutes the Indian subcontinent (H. E. Rashid 1991).

Since its independence, Bangladesh has been the poster child for international development. As Naomi Hossain (2017) has written, Bangladesh is known internationally as an “aid lab,” for having served as the site of experimentation of diverse market-friendly policies, from the early dismantling of the food rationing and distribution system, to the green revolution, to microcredit and social enterprises that were underwritten by international funding agencies and executed by diverse NGOs and governmental bodies (see also Lewis 2011). While at times the char mode of existence had been slated for complete excision through allowing chars to be eroded, or even purposefully destroyed to make way for megaprojects such as the Jamuna Bridge (Penz, Drydyk, and Bose 2011), char dwellers had largely experienced only neglect by the government. It was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century that the chars where I worked became the focus of international development projects (Brocklesby and Hobley 2003), but those had since ceased as funds had dried up and the river swept away many of the projects along with char lands. The few development studies on the chars and char dwellers focused largely on the difficulties of life lived with river erosion and the resilience and vulnerabilities of those who encountered it, oscillating

between living near the river's edge or else on roadsides (Haque 1988; Zaman 1996; Indra 2000). Other studies of char communities from an explicitly political economy perspective point to the incompleteness of land survey and reform, disallowing chauras from having the autonomy and political might that comes from holding property rights, even if these rights extended to land that existed only sporadically (Barkat, Zaman, and Raihan 2001).

As in the case of nationalist history and historiography, development studies attempts to capture and represent existing dimensions of chaura lives and realities. Those who dwelled on chars were as desirous of the opportunities that development projects promised as everyone else. However, the development paradigm too failed to provide a full understanding of what such lives entailed. There was a fundamental incapacity to appreciate any attraction or plenitude at work within chaura lives bred by the common sense that development was the only good. Although chauras very much lived in the political and socioeconomic space of Bangladesh as a nation-state, their lives and expressions, however disparate and inchoate, exceeded the space-time of Bangladesh and required further frames of reference.

While Bangladesh studies might not put up too much struggle in considering chars through a different set of lenses, after all, Bengali poetry and music speak eloquently of entities and forces beyond those of the nation-state alone, sociocultural anthropology's suspicion of any explanation for culture and society that takes its orientation from anything called nature is deep-seated. While it may be foolhardy for me to attempt a schematic overview of anthropology's repulsion of any argumentation by means of nature, I still venture to do so because it helps demonstrate how necessary such vigilance has been to keep at bay any naive materialism with its dangerous entailments of the kind I mentioned earlier. At the same time, this has meant sustaining a nature-culture divide for longer than has been productive for anthropology. A few early examples should suffice to illustrate my point. In *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*, Marcel Mauss ([1950] 1979) undertook an effective critique of the prevailing notions of anthrogeography espoused by the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, for whom states and societies were the organic outgrowths of their natural environments. While acknowledging that environmental factors were important, Mauss showed that there was no one-to-one correspondence between environment and society. Society's complexity far exceeded its environmental setting. Franz Boas waged a long intellectual battle against the eugenics movement in the United States using an early version of the argument that race was a social construct that had

been naturalized, an argument carried forward by scholars such as Jonathan Marks, among others (Boas [1940] 1982; Marks 2017). Marshall Sahlins's scathing critique of the recourse to biology and ecology to study human society can be found in his *Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (1976), in which he pushed back on E. O. Wilson's efforts to read out social organization from ant colonies to human societies.

Even environmental anthropology, which emerged and diverged from the mainstream of Boasian anthropology, was careful to not resort to crass materialist or biological explanations in its studies of societies. Both Leslie White ([1959] 2016) and Julian Steward ([1955] 1972), for instance, espoused an understanding of evolution that diverged sharply from the Spencerian and Darwinian understanding of it by bringing in the idea that in addition to physical environments, cultures in their growing complexity produced environments of their own that looped back into the evolutionary process. At the same time, their focus on evolution, over the Boasian preference for historical diffusion, as the paradigm by which to study the development of societies allowed for a greater focus on the relationship between environments and cultures. Roy Rappaport's *Pigs for the Ancestors* ([1984] 2000) was an ambitious attempt to bring together these two branches of anthropology through arguing that ritual had its own place and explanation immanent to a society, but also had utility in regulating the larger ecosystem. But Rappaport faced pushback on the grounds that he treated ritual, and culture by extension, as epiphenomenal to the maintenance of the ecosystem.

This quick schematic sketch of the state of debate on culture and nature within the early years of anthropological scholarship is to point out that the defense against nature was necessary, but also circumscribed nature almost entirely to the physical environment, race/biology, and ecology/ecosystem. This suspicion of nature has resulted in an exhausting focus on all things human to the exclusion of everything else. Thus, Donna Haraway's (2003) concept of natureculture was pioneering in bringing in the more-than-human aspect of human existence. The move away from standard narratives such as that of domestication to multispecies entanglements allowed for attention to the many nonhuman agents involved in the crafting of societies and cultures (Cassidy and Mullin 2007; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Tsing 2015). And although ontological perspectivism is much more informed by a commitment to thinking Indigenous thought as philosophy than to the more than human, it reverses the older dichotomy of one nature and many cultures to thinking about one culture and many natures, offering the insight

that each species thinks of itself as human and its prey as animals (Castro 2014). Finally, vital materialism (Bennett 2010a, 2010b, 2020) and actor-network theory (Latour 2005) expand the scope for participation within the societies of humans and nonhuman animals for inanimate matter and objects. Elizabeth Povinelli's (2016) explication of geo-ontologies underlines the importance of paying attention to the inanimate in the various ways it is both included and excluded to map contemporary formations of power.

Such, then, are the voices that will likely protest from within anthropology that there is no call for me to revert to the concept of nature and to think of persons and cultures as products of it. The concept is overly burdened by a history of problematic associations and usage, and other generative frames of reference are available with which to bring into view the part played by the many creatures with which char dwellers make their lives, and the animate-ness and agency of the matter around them, such as that of the river and the lands on which they live. While there are critiques of these more inclusive approaches, such as that they may have evolved more out of a wishfulness to have societies be more participatory and democratic than the actual realities on the ground (see Morris 2017), in my reading they do not go far enough in making nature a felt reality both cognitively and existentially. Restricting themselves to nature as material, substantive, or embodied—that is, as environment, biology, systems, animals, matter, or objects—they leave out of consideration the aspects of nature as ideational and dynamic, as productive of subjects and consciousness as of species and rocks.

While Claude Lévi-Strauss was interested in thinking as a process immersed in and emerging out of the world, he made it independent of any association with either nature or culture, as hovering disembodied over both (see Lévi-Strauss 1962, 1992). Eduardo Kohn (2013) takes up Gregory Bateson's (1972) provocation to consider thought as being looped through the world through sign systems. However, his picture of the natural world is still one of an external object to which one has a frontal relationship, which is primarily that of communication. Henri Bergson's concept of "life," to which he turned in his *Creative Evolution* (1911) so as to be done with extant debates between idealism and materialism, captures the dynamic of nature as that which is simultaneously material and most ideational, most external and most internal, but restricts its scope only to the organic. Animism, or the attribution of soul to plants, objects, and physical phenomena, may have been a productive line of analysis for me to pursue were it not for the fact that there was such an abhorrence of any hint of pantheism within the

predominantly Muslim milieu of the chars (Manzoor 2003). The chauras were as given to naturalism as any Enlightenment thinker.

Ultimately, it is only “nature” that can convey all these various aspects, not as a catchall term for everything, such as environment, biology, systems, animals, matter, objects, or thought, but as itself. Nature is not that which has to be overcome and mastered, or with which to be reconciled, but that which springs up within us and to which we offer our attention and receptivity, and activity and passivity as response.

Schelling and the Char Dwellers

Such a perspective on nature meant keeping humans in the picture, displaced from the center that they occupied in anthropocentric accounts of nature, but still a means by which nature expressed itself. Consequently, in my fieldwork I privileged the study of humans over that of the more than human. And given the thread between the chauras and the Enlightenment era through their mutual attraction to naturalism, it did not feel out of place to draw on the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, an Enlightenment figure, to help me navigate how nature made human consciousness the means for its own ends. Although I focus here on Schelling, I request the reader to imagine him to be a bit like a milieu himself, with much intellectual back-and-forth between diverse figures, specifically those who came to be called romantics and who, far from being irrational subjectivists, insisted on the rationality and impersonality of the tendencies and forces running through one (N. Khan 2021a; Nassar 2013).

Schelling is of the generation of German philosophers who came into prominence in the waning years of Immanuel Kant’s life in the late eighteenth century. He was among those who appreciated the full scope of Kant’s project of securing reason from its desire to claim to know things of which it could not have experience (e.g., God) by grounding knowledge in experience. But he was also among those who realized how much Kant had compromised in order to secure reason, most significantly by giving up any claim on the world in its immediacy, thereby consigning humans to living in a world of representations. Guided by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in their early years, a young Schelling and others sought to overcome the divide between human knowledge and the world, to seek out what came to be called the absolute, the infinite, the unconditioned, and, in Schelling’s rendition,

nature. This was not just brute nature but nature as the site of experiences of the sensible as well as the realm of the supersensible, the transcendental, and the ideational.

While still grounded in Kant's rigorous method and architectonic of thought, Schelling was involved in a wide range of experimentation on how to think of nature beyond the mechanical laws that undergird it or as a domain of necessity to being a source of freedom and creativity. These experimentations constituted the basis of his *Naturphilosophie*. Two aspects of his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* ([1797] 1988) stand out to his first-time readers. First, Schelling's view of nature encompassed attention to inanimate matter and its motion, the stars above and their movement, biological organisms and their rhythm, and thought and its striving, including that of human consciousness. I was struck by his refusal to adjudicate in favor of either matter or mind, keeping both in the picture and being attentive to the contours of their particular movements in time and space. I took this to be a commitment to both empiricism and idealism and their mutual imbrication, something I had also found in the *chaura* context. Second, I was struck by the fact that Schelling's arguments did not progress by means of the dialectic alone in which a contradiction between two premises produces a third that supersedes the two while still retaining them, a method that has come to be identified with Hegel, to whom the young Schelling was also very committed. Rather, Schelling discerned oscillation between two polarities within each scale of the organization of matter, with the dynamic of movement produced by intensification/contraction and expansion. This picture of existence as one of oscillation between two extremes also sat well with the conditionalities that informed *chaura* lives.

A closer reading of Schelling's work, specifically *System of Transcendental Idealism* ([1800] 1993) and *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* ([1799] 2004), yielded nature as pure activity, excessive productivity, and dynamic movement. It did not see a meaningful difference between inorganic matter and organic matter, producing one of the most profound meditations on matter as constituted of forces. It also did not see a difference in kind between consciousness and forces, with mind in a continuum with matter. And while nature could be determinate and directional, presenting itself as finite forms and intelligible laws to human consciousness, given its dynamism it was also oriented toward delirious excess, indeterminacy, and the dissolution of forms. The human comprehension of nature meant recognizing that nature was within one, in one's consciousness and unconscious,

that it required imagination and intuition to grasp human participation in nature, and that as a species we were bound to the same indeterminacy as inorganic matter.

Some of the questions that I saw Schelling pose over the course of his life and that I have privileged in this book are, in a world in which nature is present as a force, What are the possible relations between force and materiality, between mind and matter? How is nature both within and without us, expressed through our activity and passivity? Given that we cannot cognize nature except as appearances, as Kant laid down, what are other modes of accessing nature in its immediacy, such as through our imagination? How is nature complicit in human projects, for good or evil? Finally, How does our mythology give us a sense of the mythological as actual, a sense of our historical evolution as peoples and a sense of nature?

The first of Schelling's questions—that is, regarding the possible relations between mind and matter—became the basis to suggest a different relation between the chauras and the char land. While this relation is primarily understood as property and patrimony, I claim that it could also be understood as a join between matter and mind, imaginable through chauras extending the life of the land by means of strife and striving. The second of Schelling's explorations in conversation with the esoteric philosophy of Jacob Boehme asked how nature is within us. This led me to explore whether gaps in chaura narratives on what they did and why they did those activities in the face of erosion of their lands may be seen as nature within them, in their constitution and mental makeup. Next I studied chaura attempts to mobilize elections in many different ways, including but not restricted to ensuring elections for villages that no longer existed to secure the future existence of the villages. Their playing and replaying in their mind's eye the events of erosion that led the villages to disappear, and their future-oriented projections as to how elections would bring together villagers and possibly ensure the future of villages, served as an important instance of chauras' reflection on their place within the workings of nature. I argue that instance could serve as an empirical example of the intuition that Schelling and his mentor Johann Wolfgang von Goethe saw to be the means to access nature in its immediacy. While Schelling's understanding of the unconditioned as holding the possibility of evil within itself was his response to the question of theodicy—that is, How are human acts of evil understandable within a world in which God is present?—chauras' acts of forgetting Hindus with whom they had previously coexisted modulated

Schelling's high theological mode by suggesting that such acts may not be so much evil as just in the nature of things, of river branches, lands, and human memory to fall into ruin. They are more begetting of injustice than evil. Finally, while Schelling's late philosophy of mythology was interested in its tautegorical nature, as presencing God's revelation in its immediacy, within the chaura context this perspective on mythology was extended to understand how nature creates culture for which mythology is an important means of expressing itself, how small acts carry mythological weight and insight into the workings of the world.

Far from a heavy-handed application of abstract philosophy to lived experience, I take the relationship between Schelling and chaura existence to be one of conviviality—of which Andrew Brandel says, “[It is] life with those who offer not only competing answers to our questions but also competing questions” (2016, 324). As Stephan Palmié (2018) and Veena Das (2020) elaborate, our decision as anthropologists whether to focus on self-enclosed ontologies or contaminated and crisscrossed thinking also reflects our understanding of whether we imagine we have a future in one another's languages. This is not a fantasy of perfect commensuration and translatability but a vision of coexistence in the same world or adjacency to one another's worlds. I claim an adjacency between Schelling's theologically inflected understanding of nature and the chauras' God-saturated naturalism and stage a conversation between the two over the course of the book.

Structure of the Book

Although I continue to return to my field site, this book is based on fieldwork largely conducted between 2011 and 2017. As mentioned earlier, I selected three villages to study. I carried out classical research consisting of mapping village neighborhoods, including landownership; carrying out surveys of 10 percent of the households in each village; undertaking repeat interviews and participant observations in everyday settings and at all the major events that arose during the times of my fieldwork; doing family genealogies; tracking the agricultural seasons; learning about health and illness; inquiring after domestic and wild animals; learning about the intersections of the villages, households, and individual lives with regional and national politics and economy; and so on. I also innovated on techniques, such as producing movement maps of individuals in the mainland and those in

the char to have the basis for comparison across a cross section of the landscape. I created archives of newspaper cuttings, land-related legal cases, NGO reports, religious manuals, farmers' almanacs, story collections, and CD/DVDs of popular musical events, such as *pala gaans* (narrative songs). I repeated portions of the research during different seasons to see what changed from season to season, and I also repeated the research annually to see what changed from year to year. As villages eroded and people dispersed, I had to do considerable sleuth work to locate and follow up with those being studied. The continual changeability and mobility of my study population, combined with the fact that after I was done with my research leave I could only return during times when my university was not in session, give a certain episodic quality to my ethnography.

Chapter 1, "Moving Lands in the Skein of Property and Kin Relations," outlines the fights produced of a long history of survey, settlement, and dispute over char lands. The chapter seeks to give a sense of how law, lands, and lives are imbricated, making for a fraught sociality. At the same time it shows how this imbrication also produces a kinship assemblage that extends the arc of land beyond the occasion of its erosion. The chapter shows how expectations, desires, and anticipation modulate the vicissitudes of land.

In chapter 2, "History and Morality between Floods and Erosion," I explore the narratives of the chaura experience of erosion to show how they think of themselves as literally within the river, as entrained by the river in the same way as the river entrains sediment and vegetation. This contrasts with their experience of floods, which shows them to be within the time of the nation-state, and this experience of entraining hints at how the river may be in one's unconscious.

In chapter 3, "Elections on Sandbars and the Remembered Village," I trace how chauras displaced by the erosion of their villages return to vote politicians into office for their lost villages. The energy those living in chars invest in electioneering for villages that no longer exist points not just to self-interest in keeping one's territory alive within national maps but also to efforts to intuit one's participation in the hanging together of matter. Imagination is opposed to intelligence as a way to know nature.

In chapter 4, "Decay of the River and of Memory," we see an instance of chaura lives in which the Muslim chauras enact the erosion of villages and the degeneration of river pathways as the loss of memory of a shared existence with Hindus who lived in the villages with them until the recent past. The insight that evil is less metaphysical and more in the nature of things to

fall into ruin, to be unjust, helps to explore chaura (in)action from the perspective of human intentionality *and* the dissolutive tendencies of nature.

In chapter 5, “Death of Children and the Eruption of Myths,” I explore how the fading mythology from a past of shared existence with Hindus retains salience beyond that past. The myths of the goddess Ganga Devi and the living prophet Khwaja Khijir linger to express how Muslim chaura women experience and understand the loss of their children to watery deaths and to show how nature thereby enters the mythic and founds culture through women’s dreams and discourses.

A short epilogue, “The Chars in Recent Years,” tracks my last visit to the field site to update myself on the changes to the milieu. It remains attentive to the aspect of nature within the stories the char dwellers tell of themselves even as they speak of new horizons.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Approaching the char, it was hard
to tell where the river ended and the
shore began. Photo by author.



DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

The fields around Dokhin Teguri
were lush and the village hemmed
in by trees. Photo by author.



UNIVERSITY
PRESS



DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

If one looked more closely, the fields
were pocked with large craters
with their sides collapsing inward.
Photo by author.



DUKE

The approach to Rihayi Kawliya gave notice that the work of erosion was more immediate and catastrophic than flooding. Photo by author.

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

The denizens of Rihayi Kawliya had
taken to living on new char land
amid catkin grass. Photo by author.



UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Those newly transplanted to Kuwait
Para in Boro Gorjan after the land
of their villages had eroded. Photo by
author.



DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

The houses in Kuwait Para backed onto a branch of the river. Planting komli (a shrubby plant) provided some modicum of physical and psychic separation from the waters. Photo by author.



DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Introduction

1. I sometimes use the expressions “form of life” or “mode of existence” when I wish to indicate there were some shared agreements among the chauras as to what constituted their lives.
2. Rising ocean waters and salinization of land were not the only ways in which chaura lives were threatened by climate change. Cyclone surges due to increased activity in the oceans were another. The impact of global warming on the circulation of winds necessary for the monsoons in the region was another major way in which the area might see climate change. Increased glacier melt and erratic or intensified rainfall could also be contributing to increased flooding. Climate change manifests in greater variability and uncertainty, rather than predictable, albeit catastrophic change.
3. The chauras’ capacity for being different to themselves—in other words, espousing different sets of agreements on the nature of the social—recalls “Eskimo” society, of which Marcel Mauss ([1950] 1979) writes that it was not necessarily shaped by the topography of the landscape, which was in between water and land in consistency, as claimed by anthropogeography, but was communal in the winters and individualist in the summers, with the switch from one structural form to the other correlated to the seasons without being entirely determined by them.

DU

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Chapter 1. Moving Lands in the Skein of Property and Kin Relations

1. Marilyn Strathern (2009) claims that in certain cases, land as property may be productively thought of as not just being owned by people but also simultaneously owning people, who are called on to work on it. In other words, land is productive, and the people are one of its products. Through her extension of the concept of intellectual property to this situation, we are able to see how a people can feel entitled and duty bound to the land. Strathern's articulation somewhat describes the two-way relation between the chauras and the chars that I am charting, in which the chars call on the chauras to settle and cultivate them, and the chauras feel duty bound to realize the chars' productivity. Thus, there is a consonance between the two, but this consonance is not claimed on the basis of originary inhabitation. In other words, the chauras do not feel entitled to char land just because they settled it and have a long, ancestral history of interaction or property rights over it, but rather on the grounds that they are the only ones to answer its call as it keeps reemerging. I go further in arguing that the chauras respond to the tug of the land on them even when the land is not present, and that this tug of land, operating as an intangible property, a submerged potential, is what keeps chauras in their environment and working to ensure that land reemerges. This chapter describes two ways, physical and legal, in which this labor is undertaken; other ways will be presented in the later chapters.
2. For us to understand where someone like Strathern, with her notion of land laying claims on its products, including people, fits within this history of property, we have only to reprise the anthropological analysis of property by thinkers such as Durkheim (1983) and Gluckman (1965), who specified that the possessing person, the one who claims property or rights to property, derives from an originary community or status relation that asserts its hold on the person as either a member of the community or a status holder. It is only the person's relation to the community or position within a set of relations that authorizes the person to set aside any thing for their exclusive use. In other words, property is not exclusively a relation between a person and a thing but rather a relation between the person and other persons, whether they be other members of the community or other status holders. Property mediates relations. Furthermore, the derivation of the person's right to the property from an originary community or status holding means that that community or status lays a prior claim on that person, akin to land laying a prior claim on people as in the case spoken of by Strathern. I thank Sruti Chaganti for her insightful essay "On Property and Personhood" (2015) that helped me to delineate the anthropological position on property and a possible line of connection to Strathern.

3. Interestingly, it is largely land that materializes property rights and relations, in both the *chaura* context and many others. What is it about land that allows it to serve as the condition of possibility for property? One ready explanation is that given the antiquity and generality of agriculture, land is an image ready at hand. The other more anthropologically interesting speculation is that if our understanding of the human comes from our notion of ourselves as a practical species, *pace* Marx, shaping the world that the species finds around itself, then land is a materialization of the world.
4. I take owners to be those whose names were on the record of rights and title deeds, whereas lands might be under adverse possession, with land laws recognizing the length of possession as significant in determining actual or meaningful possession (Sirdar 1999). This was an artifact of British colonial law that grew to be in favor of *rai*yats or those possessing the right to hold or cultivate land. Or, in the case of *char* lands in which owners had sold their lands and the land had changed hands subsequently but without recourse to the formal, administrative means to record these changes, the new owner was only recognizable as possessor.
5. Daniel Miller (2007) makes a similar argument. Taking the example of Britain, he cautions that while in keeping with the analysis of new kinship “relationship” is certainly the primary way by which people make kin, in certain domains of life, such as in the practice of inheritance, older kinship norms, normative and legally airtight, seem to preside. Here he finds “an often almost desperate desire to repudiate experience in order to remain consistent with the imperatives of that formal order” (Miller 2007, 538).
6. While the writings on Bengali kinship do not fall under the rubric of new kinship studies, they are influenced by David Schneider (1984), specifically his intervention into old kinship, as a result of which scholars began to ply kinship terms not as part of some underlying structure to be uncovered but as symbolic of social relations. Transposing these thoughts to Bengali Muslim kinship, which is largely Bengali kinship (Fruzzetti and Östör 1976; Inden and Nicholas 2005), we might say that the importance that is given to blood (*rokto*) in such societies does not indicate the primacy of descent in kinship structures but rather that *rokto* is an important symbol by which to understand who belongs to whom and how. So while a child is a blood relative with the father’s family, the child is also a blood relative with the mother’s family. *Rokto* is a term to indicate this relationship (*shoreek*), but it also exists alongside *kutum*, those made relatives through marriage, with whom there are no blood relations but with whom relations may still be strong, as indicated by the quality of nearness or being *nikot* (Fruzzetti and Östör 1976). Generally, Bengali society, including Muslims, is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. Marriage, particularly among Muslims, is exogamous, with

the wife relocating to the husband's home after marriage and taking on his *gusti*, or clan, which is one of the branches of a larger *bongsho*, or patrilineage (Arens and van Beurden 1977). While she retains her blood relations with her natal family, she also becomes *shoreek*, or included within the category of blood relations in her husband's lineage, indicating that this is not descent in the classical understanding of it—that is, kinship recapitulating biological reproduction. Furthermore, *kutum* include relatives far in excess of the usual in-laws and are better characterized by relations of giving and sharing rather than by marriage alone (Inden and Nicholas 2005). Consequently, drawing on *chaura* usage, I use the frequently used terms *shoreek* and *kutum*, instead of the usual concepts of descent and alliance, when speaking of *chaura* kin relations. A. H. M. Zehadul Karim also notes the large prevalence of fictive kin among rural Muslims in Bangladesh in which the term *dhormo* is affixed to usual kin relationships such as *baap* (father), *ma* (mother), *bhai* (brother), and *bon* (sister). Literally *dhormo* means “religious,” and its use signals a relationship between two otherwise unrelated persons. It was usually an asymmetrical relationship between a powerful person and a less powerful person by which the latter gains some assistance, protection, and perhaps prestige (Karim 1990, 80–81). It merits mention because *dhormo* relations were in wide evidence in the chars.

7. An introduction to Shohidul is warranted as he appears frequently in my book. He began as a guide lent to me by MMS and then became my full-time research assistant. I initially relied on him to introduce me to people, transport me on his motorbike, and keep me company in male-only spaces and events, but he soon became a friend and an invaluable interlocutor. He hailed from the village of Bishtipur, or Village of Rain, in Sirajganj that went underwater in the 1980s. His large family had been prominent in Bishtipur, with epic stories attached to their names. After the breakage, Shohidul's father, a village teacher, moved to Nagarpur in nearby Tangail and set up his household there. Through a tremendous stratagem, his father acquired a good deal of contiguous property in this area that led to his family becoming cultivators on a large scale. They were also widely respected for their education and piety. Shohidul's family background and NGO experience were invaluable in giving me privileged access to sensitive topics, such as land-related information. In addition, Shohidul was a talented storyteller with a prodigious memory, and he quickly acquired a strong anthropological sensibility.
8. Here is folklorist Saymon Zakaria's description of the dance of *lathi khela*: “Carrying colored sticks in their hands, they come down to the field. They start yelling out threats . . . and sometimes engage in some mock aggressive comedic banter. Then they begin to circle the whole field. As the games start, the group splits into two to fight each other. They attack each other with their sticks, shouting out warnings, ‘Don't

dare!’ . . . As the fight goes on, a musician will try to interrupt. . . . A fighter replies, ‘What?’ This banter goes on and on for quite some time . . . verging into philosophical speculation. For instance, a fighter might say, ‘There are two parts of me, one woman, one man. Right now the woman is fighting’. . . . Lathi Khela is skilled theater” (Zakaria 2011, 184–85).

9. See Jenneke Arens’s *Women, Land and Power in Bangladesh: Jhagrapur Revisited* (2011) for its description of how khas land management toward redistributing it among the landless poor has eluded effective government application.
10. Degree most likely referred to legal decree.
11. Shalish has a long history in the context of Bengal. The panchayat (literally, “the council of five”) had mediated civil and criminal disputes within the context of villages since medieval times. The British replaced these with village courts starting in 1919. These courts were taxed to mediate settlements and not try cases, that being the jurisdiction of the legal courts (Siddiqui 2005). The village courts have also been mobilized by the Bangladesh state and have been much critiqued for the courts’ capture by local elites and reconstituted through the reform efforts of NGOs and international donors (Berger 2017). However, I would argue that the courts elude full capture by the state, external forces, and internal powers, and thereby retain their reputation and normative hold on rural life.
12. Almost all studies of changing rural structures and economies in Bangladesh note the rise of the value of agricultural labor as a result of the liberalization of agriculture over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. This liberalization consisted in the reduced cost of irrigation equipment, privatization of fertilizer export and sales, and the production of high-yield varieties of rice (R. Ahmed, Haggblade, and Chowdhury 2000; Westergaard and Hossain 2005). It ushered in the green revolution in Bangladesh (Arens 2011) and was part of a larger set of structural adjustments imposed on the country as a consequence of loans taken by Bangladesh at concessionary interest rates (A. R. Khan 2001).
13. It is not only the case that Hindus left for India during the 1947 partition or due to subsequent Pakistani persecution during the India-Pakistan War of 1965. Hindus continued to leave for India well after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 (Guhathakurta 2012).
14. In her classic study of rural society in Bangladesh shortly after it gained its independence in 1971, Kirsten Westergaard notes that the abolition of the zamindari system in the early 1950s eliminated the zamindars, but without eliminating rent interest or redistributing land, the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act in effect left the entire structure intact to be run by *talukdars*, earlier tasked by the zamindars to collect rent, and *jotedars*, who were effectively wealthy raiyats or peasants. The continuation of an older way of being, with only some statutory changes,

is characterized by the preponderance of moneylending, states of indebtedness, and sharecropping (Westergaard 1985). This would explain early writings on village societies in Bangladesh that characterized its villages as still dominated by the culture of zamindars (see Zaidi 1970; A. Islam 1974).

15. Inheritance law in Bangladesh, notably within the Muslim Personal Law Application Act (1937) and the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961), follows the prescriptions of Sharia, or Islamic law, which states that all property be distributed to legal descendants according to a set formula, with wives of deceased heads of household receiving one-fourth of their husband's holdings if there are no children or one-eighth if there are children, with the rest being distributed equally among sons, with each daughter getting half the share given to a son. Other males and females are also entitled, particularly if the deceased dies without leaving a male issue. The deceased may also stipulate in his will if he wishes to leave any portion of his property to nonentitled persons. However, Ansef did not inherit the land from his uncle Thandu. He gained the land through a resolution mediated in shalish. Whether this resolution was binding for all time and how it was made so binding was not something I could elicit from Ansef, but it would explain his desire to ensure his hold over the land through marriage relations.
16. In Edmund Leach's magisterial study of kinship and property relations in a village in Sri Lanka, *Pul Eliya* (1961), he claims that kinship is merely another way to speak about property relations. In his detailed case studies he shows how the normative kinship order did not in any way prescribe which fights over land emerged and how these conflicts were ultimately resolved. The many arrangements that were seen through these fights indicated that kinship was epiphenomenal. While I agree with Leach that the normative kinship order is not always predictive of property-related fights and their resolutions, I think he misses the opportunity to see how distant parts of a widespread kinship order were activated by these fights and how these activated parts may have made the fights as much about kinship as property rights, about bringing pockets of flexibility and negotiation within one's social reality. In fact, I would go so far as to claim that kinship and property are coextensive.
17. See Bryan Maddox (2001), in which he explores the different types of literacies, what he calls "subaltern literacies," present in economic practices in rural Bangladesh.
18. The predominant inheritance structure, outlined in note 15, is considered to be very schismatic, having led to a fragmentation of landholdings across Bangladesh (A. Rahman 1986). At present an average Bangladeshi has access to only 16 decimals of land (about .06 hectare), one of the smallest person-to-land ratios in the world, which effectively counts as landlessness. Within this context, inheritance does not carry

the weight and promise that it does within other capitalist societies (see Yanagisako 2015). As Atiur Rahman (1986) and Michael Harris (1989) note, inheritance is no guarantor for avoiding poverty and landlessness, with many of those people inheriting small plots of land, which are often not contiguous, effectively selling them off or using them as collateral for a loan and losing the land that way. These authors write that this fragmentation has worked to the benefit of currently landless people who are able to afford to buy the small plots of land that come into the market through the process described in this chapter and thereby consolidate contiguous holdings to move out of landlessness. There is no major concentration of land in the hands of farmers (although this is not the case for industrialists or even the state) as there is a ceiling of 33 bighas (approximately 20 acres) that a person can own. This may be because the state and the World Bank privilege small farm holdings as the most effective way to cultivate land in Bangladesh (M. H. Khan 2004).

19. It is useful to keep in mind the status of girls and women in chaura society. While the birth of girls weighed heavily on their parents because of dowry considerations, chauras by and large did not discriminate between their sons and daughters. They fed and provided for both as best they could, and it was the demonstration of intelligence that ensured the education of one child over another. By and large most boys and girls received only an elementary-level education, due as much to high demand for their labor and the itinerancy in their lives produced by floods and erosion as to budgetary constraints. While both girls and boys were expected to labor from early in their lives, there was considerable gender segregation, with girls rarely venturing out of their homes except to go to school and visit with relatives. This gave chaura girls a good reputation and made them desirable as wives. Parents practiced hypergamy to the extent possible because they wanted their daughters to leave the chars and live more comfortable lives on the mainland. They also tended to give their daughters in marriage much earlier than eighteen years of age, as demands for dowry were lower for younger girls. Char lives being considered difficult, this made it hard for males of marriage age to practice hypergamy. Most often they married within the extended family, lineage, the village, or the area.
20. Arens (2011) presents systematic findings that are close to my own in that she shows that more women in Bangladesh lay claims on their inheritance from their fathers in 2009 than in 1974 but delay those claims until after their parents are deceased. They also rely on intergenerational relations, such as the affection of an uncle for his sister's son, to facilitate such transfers. She also notes that most studies on women's access to land in Bangladesh focus exclusively on women's rights to their fathers' property but miss the fact that women also access land through rights to their husbands' property upon their husbands' deaths and through

purchasing land themselves. These are important dimensions to keep in mind in studying women and land in Bangladesh. At the end of her study, Arens is unable to conclude that landownership necessarily provides women more power and protection within society, but she is able to claim that such ownership is preferable to the elusive ideal of women's empowerment pursued by population control projects, microcredit, and social enterprise.

21. How is this extension of matter through mind philosophically thinkable? After all, for Descartes, matter was inert, if not dead. Kant, after Newton, saw matter as dynamic, held together through the balance of the forces of repulsion and attraction. This dynamism was a foundational insight for Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. If matter was dynamic, then mind necessarily grew out of matter and retained matter's self-organizing properties. Products of the mind were material insofar as they shared the same origins, forces, and properties as matter. Mind was an extension of matter, lending itself to matter to render it intelligible, and to elaborate, extend, and realize matter's capacities. This was a companion process to the subject coming into consciousness within transcendental philosophy.
22. Within Schelling's transcendental philosophy, the "ought" had the nature of a will and was a demand placed by consciousness on oneself. It was the occasion for the self to come into consciousness of itself as object. I thank Andrew Brandel for drawing this to my attention.
23. See Sachiko Murata and William Chittick (1998) and S. Parvez Manzoor (2003) for a comprehensive introduction to the Islamic approach to creation and the divine in nature.

Chapter 2. History and Morality between Floods and Erosion

1. The outsize importance of floods in the Bangladeshi imaginary has been commented on. In their book *Floods in Bangladesh* (2006), Thomas Hofer and Bruno Messerli juxtapose the numbers killed and rendered homeless by floods, river erosion, and cyclones in Bangladesh for the past two centuries. They show that erosion made homeless the largest numbers of people, and cyclones killed the largest numbers of people, but that floods had commanded the most media attention, funds, and projects of the three. There is no definitive explanation for this disparity. It might be based on the spectacular nature, extensive spread, duration, and repetition of catastrophic floods that caught the international and national imagination, whereas, for instance, erosion tended to be more ongoing and localized. Certainly, floods had increased in frequency and intensity since the last century in South Asia, but so had river erosion and coastal cyclones, joined more recently by landslides in the hilly areas. In their introduction to *Water Resource Development in Bangladesh: Historical*