Introduction

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It gives me great pleasure to introduce this collection of essays by Joya Chatterji. I first met Joya thirty years ago, not long after she arrived at Trinity College, Cambridge, to begin undergraduate studies for her second BA. She came from India with a stellar reputation which it did not take her very long to justify – walking off with Trinity's top prizes as undergraduate and post-graduate. From the beginning, she showed a passion for historical research which, I am delighted to say, has never diminished and has led her to many subsequent achievements: not least, election as a Fellow of the British Academy where she stands in rare company both as a woman and as an historian of something other than Britain. The "promise" that she offered all those years ago, when she passed under Trinity's Great Gate suitcase in hand, has been more than fulfilled.

In particular, that promise has realised itself in a series of projects that have changed the way that we think about Indian (and, more broadly, South Asian) history over the last century. Her first book, *Bengal Divided* (1994), shifted focus away from Islam and Muslim "fanaticism" in providing the driving force behind the Partition of India and on to supposedly "secular" Indian nationalism, middle-class aspiration, and the shadow of Hindu nationalism. Her second book, *The Spoils of Partition* (2007), rejected the idea of Partition as a breaking apart and took it more as a process of re-making – of both the social structure of eastern India and the nature of the post-colonial state. Her third

(jointly written) *The Bengal Diaspora* (2016) challenged the idea of migration and (re-)settlement as exceptional conditions and viewed them in multiple dimensions as responding to precise and complex motivations. Her latest project on "citizenship", whose beginnings are reflected in essays included below, contrasts the rigidities of formal and legal "national" citizenship with the serendipitous and opportunistic political circumstances often lying behind its definition.

What is striking about this oeuvre, first and foremost, is its courage and originality. In all cases, it confronts received wisdoms which are often deeply held and capable of mobilising soldieries in their defence. Joya has never backed away from controversy and has proved herself capable of standing her ground even when coming under ferocious fire – be it from Kolkata's *bhadralok* intellectuals, whose historic culture she tarred with the charge of Hindu chauvinism, or the likes of David Starkey seeking to defend the narrowest idea of "Britishness". Moreover, the positions that she takes up tend to be justified by history itself since, over time, her heterodoxies usually become orthodoxies.

Also, she is usually among the very first to take them up. The lead-up time to publishing a "serious" history book is considerable and, if it is taken into account, Joya has a remarkable record of anticipating imminent shifts in both public sensibility and historiography. The work for her *Bengal Divided*, which reframed Hindu nationalism as a central feature of the Indian national experience, began in the mid 1980s – long before the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the rise of the BJP. The work for *Spoils* began in the late 1990s, long before the issue of eastern India's "soft" borders and ongoing Bangladeshi "infiltration" hit the headlines. Needless to say, the issues raised by international migration and citizenship, on which she began working in the 2000s, are now central to the politics (and identity) not only of diaspora, but of the USA and Europe themselves. As with all ground-breaking historians, Joya's sense of the links between past, present, and future is

especially acute: if she backed racehorses, she would probably be a millionaire by now.

But also, and as with all visionary historians too, her work is deeply rooted in concern for a place and a people. While Joya's eye may roam across international movements, world wars, and global dispersions, it keeps coming back to Bengal whence both she and her adventures in history started out. Whether Divided, Spoiled, or Migrated, Bengal is the constant reference point for her judgements, comparisons, and perspectives. It is, however, a very idiosyncratic Bengal – especially in relation to that to which we are used. That Bengal is of the Kolkata *bhadralok*, the respectable, educated, Hindu middle classes who have provided many of India's leading intellectuals and written much of the nation's history. Indeed, it has sometimes seemed as if the history of modern India is their own history.

Yet, although with one foot in north Bengal, Joya has always stood somewhat apart. Born of an English mother, with family in Kolkata but raised in Delhi and colleged in Cambridge, she has a classic insider-outsider profile. While sensitive to the nuances of *bhadralok* culture, she is capable of sharp (self-)criticism and aware of the limitations of provincialism. Her Bengal is religiously plural and peopled as much by peasants, migrants, and paupers as an urban proto-bourgeoisie. Her Bengal is no less fractured and brutalised by colonialism, Partition, and the post-colonial state. However, it does not only stand as a field of negation and lament. In *Spoils*, and in several of the essays included here, she shows how even little people mattered, re-built their lives, challenged and re-made policies of the state, and acculturated themselves to new environments. Her subalterns are not divorced from elites but active with them in the world; and their violence, while recognised, is always seen as purposive. Her Bengal may have its tragedies, too, but it is also positively engaged in the epic struggles making this world. It does not just serve nostalgically as a surrogate for a world that has passed, if it ever was.

The essays gathered here represent but part of much wider work exemplified in Joya's other monographs and jointly written collections. In her preface, she disclaims her facility with the essay form. Yet, characteristically, she is over-modest. When commissioned to write on specified topics for themed collections, she shows great mastery – if it is still permissible to use such a gendered term. The essay on decolonisation provides a succinct account of its subject, explores nuances of concept, and draws together different strands of exegesis. However, in one regard, it may also illustrate her point. The essay uncovers increasing layers of complexity – decolonisation proceeds in different time dimensions – until the questions asked become questionable themselves and the conclusions reached necessarily provisional. QED are not three letters that can ever be put under a Chatterji essay.

Rather, as she herself notes, most of her essays represent either the beginnings of projects which she would later take on to study in greater depth; or else distinctive corners within them attracting separate exploration. Both types reflect her historian's craft, her passionate love of the archive, and her respect for detail and context. Many of the essays begin by rehearsing received understandings – of Partition demarcation or refugee settlement or "national" citizenship – but show that close readings of the archive reveal hiatuses and pose unanswered questions. She then begins to reconstruct events on the basis of better information, drawing out paradoxes, suggesting alternative conclusions, and pointing to the need for further research – in many cases, which she herself later supplies.

What emerges from the essays is often quite startling. The demarcation of Partition followed no master plan or even coherent strategy but was made up of myriad *ad hoc* decisions taken on the ground, often by obscure actors. Refugee policy, immigrant rights, and even definitions of national citizenship, again, were produced by no *deus ex machina* but out of day-to-day struggles on

the streets and in the courts where the supposed omnicompetent power of the "modern state" was forced into compromise by the irrationality of its own bureaucracy and the recalcitrance of "the people". Joya's history has little time for Big Ideas or Great Men. It revels in the minutiae of events, which she sees unravelling Programmes and undermining Projects. Not only in war but also in politics, all battle plans would seem to dissolve on first contact with the enemy or, in this case, that between state authority and popular aspiration.

Similarly, events could undermine the most fixed of appearances and reverse the most obvious of truths. Pakistan and India may have been born in bitter hostility and proclaimed different goals of faith and secularism. However, she demonstrates that, in their dealings with each other, their governments became ever more convergent and even acquired each other's imagined vices and virtues. Over the refugee crisis, Pakistan found itself adopting increasingly secular policies, while over refugee property India found itself introducing religious criteria into its definition of citizenship. Indeed, the rarely remarked similarities between Pakistan and India represent an important general insight offered in these essays.

So, too, is the revelation that modern ideas of citizenship and nationality were not invented in "the West" and diffused to the Rest, but that they were in important ways re-fashioned out of the experience of decolonisation in the colonies themselves. Joya's essay "Citizenship in South Asia" stands at the start of what will be her latest major research project. But already some of the outlines of its trajectory are becoming clear: how Partition and post-imperial diaspora posed new problems to the concept of citizenship; how the ex-colonies came to strike back, forcing new ideas about identity and nationality onto the metropolis itself.

Other essays included here are more in the nature of explorations of nooks and crannies easily overlooked from the main vantage points of history, but containing valuable treasures. Two of

the most thought-provoking concern "immobility" and those left behind by migration. We tend to think of processes of migration in terms of those who moved. But many who desperately wished to leave were prevented from doing so, trapped in situations becoming increasingly intolerable; and others who "stayed" behind continued to be part of networks connected to the mobile, still shaping the latter's social identities. Joya's work here immeasurably broadens the meaning(s) of migration, piecing together perceived fragments into whole processes again.

Elsewhere, she also considers the alternatives and the failures of history as the record actually turned out – and as historians have all too easily forgotten. The successful construction of Indian national identity and citizenship since 1947 has tended to blot out the contingency of the process and the many other possibilities existing at the time. It makes a modern and democratic India seem inevitable. Yet she shows strong leanings at the time towards a Balkanised subcontinent; towards the preservation of monarchical systems of order; even towards mystical and spiritual "Gandhian" polities. Understanding what did not eventuate is an important part of understanding what did, and why. Joya constantly reminds us of the many possibilities contained in the past, only some of which ever came to be realised.

Many historians are driven by the quest for self-understanding, for appreciation of the contexts that have given rise to themselves. In Joya's case, these are located in Bengal and most of the essays return to this focus again and again. Yet they reveal her to be anything but local in her breadth of vision and grasp of historical movement. They traverse countries and continents, deal with ranges of problems from state-building, to survival, to national, religious, and gender identity, and touch on several of the most critical international issues of our times. We see both Bengal in the world and the world in Bengal. They represent a marvellous introduction to her wider works and will more than serve their purpose if they take readers towards those studies and to her

persistent questioning of why our world should have turned out as it has, and what possibilities there may be of making it again – and better.

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