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.

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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.

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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.
Source: Google Earth.
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