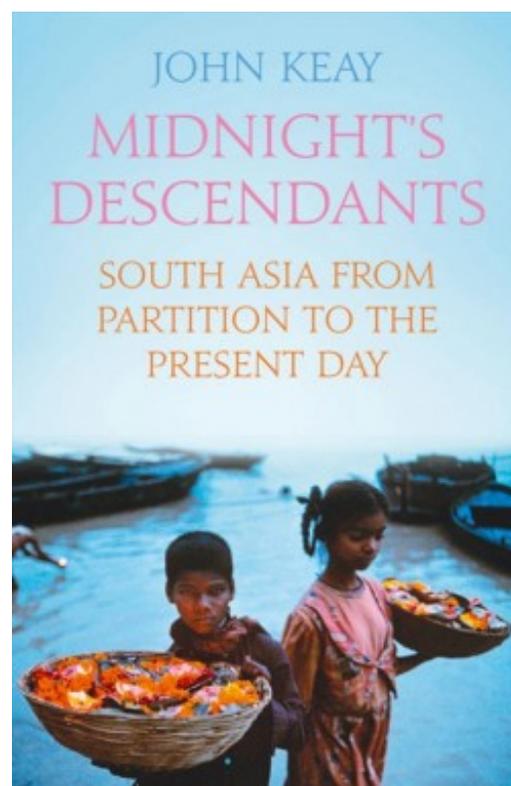


# Living history in South Asia

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**John Keay** calls for more regional approaches to South Asia's history at a recent book launch at LSE of *Midnight's Descendants*, reports **Laleh Habib**. At a recent [talk](#) at the Asia Research Centre, historian John Keay presented a "contemporary history" of South Asia as part of the launch of his new book, *Midnight's Descendants: South Asia from Partition to the Present Day*. Keay described his history as 'contemporary' because the events detailed in the book are contemporaneous with the authors' life. Describing his association with the region, Keay recalled his experience of watching televised independence celebrations in Delhi, aged six. At the age of 19, he travelled to the region for the first time, and has since returned every year "as a journalist, documentary-maker, lecturer, writer of many books and a taker of many holidays." *Midnight's Descendants* is the latest of his many books on South Asia. While South Asia has been the subject of much of Keay's previous work, the scope and focus of *Midnight's Descendants* is unique, exploring the trajectories of all the constituent nations of region from Partition to the present day. At LSE, Keay argued for the need to study the region as a whole; while South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, it has a joint past and shares concerns for the future. He added that he was struck by the overarching similarities between South Asian countries, rather than their differences. Despite following such divergent trajectories, Keay maintained that the countries of South Asia have followed certain parallels: they share bloody beginnings in Partition, and early experiences with nation-building and constitution-drafting, some more expediently than others. In 1971, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh all had democratically elected leaders who enjoyed overwhelming support, all three of whom were toppled within a span of four years. The 1980s saw the rise of religious militancy and fundamentalism, fueled by diasporic elements. This was followed by concurrent periods of economic growth and liberalism in the 1990s, reflected in the increase of cotton exports from Bangladesh, Dr Manmohan Singh's policies of economic liberalisation in India, and Nawaz Sharif's pro-business agenda in his first two prime-ministerial terms. In his talk, Keay navigated his audience through the *sundarbans* that lie between India and Bangladesh. The shifting mud banks through which the border runs, Keay suggested, highlight the absurdity of the international boundaries in South Asia, cutting through land holdings and communities, and moving continuously as a result of the water gushing through them. These demarcations are further muddled by the presence of enclaves, bits of Bangladesh in India, and vice versa, and the shifting riverine soils of the *chars* [silt islands], which pay no heed to borders and render their residents immigrants in neighbouring countries with a change of tide. Borders and identities are not the only contentious topics in India. Indeed, as Keay acknowledged at the start of his talk, the very idea of a contemporary history is an oxymoron. Without the distance and detachment of years, an analysis of current events in South Asia remains controversial, crowded by different perspectives. Keay acknowledged that his work "will probably be challenged, and will certainly be superseded". The animated question and answer session that followed laid credence to this, and emphasised the continuing need to study South Asia more holistically.



## About the Author

**Laleh Habib** graduated with a Master's degree from LSE's Department of Media and Communication in 2006.

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