

*Syeda Rozana Rashid*

## **OVERSEAS LABOUR MIGRATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: STRATEGISING INFORMAL SOCIAL SECURITY BY RURAL BANGLADESHIS**

=====

### **Abstract**

The possibilities of economic prosperity, upward mobility and status improvement are some of the most powerful images that shape the desires and expectations of overseas labour migration of Bangladeshis. In a development perspective, investment of remittances for building houses, boosting kinship ties and status seeking may appear as unproductive and irrational. But people in Bangladesh have a different logic. In a situation where the state is unable to provide formal insurance and guarantees of wellbeing, people always feel the need to secure their position within the society via their investment in social capital. The absence of well-functioning capital and formal credit facilities for poor people creates strong pressures for overseas migration as a strategy to build informal social net. The paper suggests that the extent to which overseas migration can be a route to self-sustaining progress for people and the state depends largely on an efficient infrastructure, and well designed and carefully implemented formal protection and insurances.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to labour migration issues in Bangladesh owing to a phenomenal growth of migrants and their remittances. Development practitioners calculate the contribution of labour migration in terms of creation of employment and the role of remittances in maintaining the balance of payments and foreign currency reserves. They often consider spending remittances for household consumption, life-cycle events, and upward mobility as 'unproductive'. There is a dearth of research, however, to understand why it is important for migrants to use their remittances in 'unproductive' sectors. Indeed, the challenges migrants face in transforming their economic capital into social

---

**Syeda Rozana Rashid**, Ph.D., is currently working as Programme Coordinator in Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), an affiliate of University of Dhaka. Her e-mail address is: srr21rozana@hotmail.com

status and social security are often overlooked by the researchers who focus on the real difficulties in investment of migrants' remittances for development.

It is in this context that this paper examines the contribution of overseas labour migration through the lens of social mobility and informal security. It analyses the expectations of upward social mobility and higher status of the migrant families, who are often without any form of social security or insurance from the state or private sector. It is argued in this paper that remittances are a form of economic capital, but this alone is not enough to improve social position. In order to be socially mobile, migrants display their capacity to spend. They use remittances in building a house, marriage ceremonies, buying animals for sacrifice, leasing and buying land, all of which can be thought of generating symbolic capital. Some people try to strengthen their position by offering others patronage, paying large donations for mosques or construction of roads, and helping the poor in various ways. In other words, successful migrant families in the villages have accrued various forms of capital and mobilised these for upward social mobility.

This paper has its origin in a D.Phil study '*Livelihood and Social Protection in International Labour Migration: A Case Study of Bangladesh*.'<sup>1</sup> Data and information used in this paper were collected through a year's ethnographic research in two migration-intensive villages in greater Comilla region.

The paper is organised into six sections including the introduction. It begins with a brief overview of labour migration from Bangladesh which is followed by a section on analytical framework. The fourth section analyses how migration has become a crucial means for households to achieve upward mobility and status. The section discusses how the economic capital earned in migration is converted into symbolic capital in order to claim local status. The fifth section discusses how connections to *Bidesh* (Foreign) constitute an important form of cultural capital for the migrants and their households in their attempt to move up the social ladder. Finally, the paper ends with a brief conclusion and recommendations.

## 2. OVERSEAS LABOUR MIGRATION IN BANGLADESH

Temporary or short-term international labour migration<sup>2</sup> of Bangladeshis to the Gulf and South-East Asia began in the 1970s. According to an estimate of

---

<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted by the author during 2004-2008 as part of her Ph. D at the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, UK.

<sup>2</sup> A temporary labour migrant is defined by the 1990 UN Convention as a person, who is employed or was employed or will be employed in a country of which s/he is not a citizen. Short-term or temporary labour migrants can be differentiated from permanent or other types of migrants by two distinct characteristics:

Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training of the Government of Bangladesh, more than 6.5 million Bangladeshis have migrated in short term contract as labour from 1976 to 2008. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Libya, Bahrain, Oman, Lebanon and Singapore are the most common destinations. Statistically, 48 percent of Bangladeshi migrants are employed in unskilled jobs, while another 48 percent are engaged in various semi-skilled and skilled jobs as manufacturing or garments workers, drivers, machine operators, carpenters, tailors, masons and so on. Doctors, nurses, engineers and teachers are regarded as professionals who comprise only 4 percent of the total labour migrants. It is true that jobs classified as '3D' (Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding) are almost always reserved for migrant workers in the Gulf and other Asian countries.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to the Gulf and South-East Asia, few Bangladeshis migrate to Europe, North America and Australia with work visas, although over the last few decades many Bangladeshis have migrated to the western countries as students and chose to remain there by changing their immigration status. Based on an educated guess, Siddiqui<sup>4</sup> estimates that around 1,178,400 Bangladeshis live in western countries as citizens. Among the 500,000 Bangladeshis living in the USA, 90 percent are professionals.<sup>5</sup> Since 1990s, Bangladeshis are entering the US under 'Opportunity Visa' (OP-1) and Diversity Visa (DV-1). The majority of those who have migrated to the US under these visa schemes are relatively less educated (most have secondary education) and found jobs in gas stations, restaurants, stores, security companies and taxi services.<sup>6</sup> Current migration to the UK is mainly for family reunification with those who are already there or for marriage. As estimated by Siddiqui<sup>7</sup>, nearly 500,000 Bangladeshis live in the UK<sup>8</sup>, more than two-thirds of whom work in the catering, retailing and restaurant sectors. Over the last few years, around 50,000 Bangladeshis have also migrated to Australia, New Zealand and Canada as students, professionals and skilled

---

a) short-term migrants stay in the country of employment in specific job contracts for short duration which may be subject to renewal even for a number of times and b) short-term migrants are obliged to return to the country of origin upon completion of their contracts.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Appleyard. (ed.) *Emigration Dynamics in Developing Countries II: South Asia*, Ashgate, England 1998.

<sup>4</sup> T. Siddiqui, *Institutionalising Diaspora Linkage: The Emigrant Bangladeshis in UK and USA*, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of Bangladesh and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Dhaka, 2004, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>8</sup> British official sources put this figure at 300,000.

migrants.<sup>9</sup> Relatively rich and well educated Bangladeshis go to these countries to study at Universities. Unlike migration to the Gulf and South-East Asian countries, these developed countries are less likely to draw unskilled people from the rural areas of Bangladesh.

Bangladeshis, who go abroad for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs mostly belong to rural low-income households with very little or no land of their own. They are not marginalised or the poorest of the poor<sup>10</sup> but possess very limited material resources to bear the cost of migration. Many of them are prepared to gamble their last resort by selling land or borrowing money from relatives or moneylenders for the opportunity to migrate, which may lead to social mobility through accumulation of economic capital.

### 3. AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *Social Mobility*

Social mobility - that is the movement of people, households and groups between different positions within the system of social stratification of the society - is a well-researched and established phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> The vast literature on the subject is inextricably entangled with wider discussions of wealth, race, ability, hard work, education, gender, culture and power. Most sociological attention has focused on intergenerational mobility which refers to changes in social status of a person, family or group over generations. In contrast intra-generational mobility refers to the level of upward or downward mobility of a person, family or group in its lifetime. Intra-generational mobility consists of movement up and down the stratification system by members of a single generation. Intra-generational mobility is often assessed in absolute or relative terms. Absolute mobility means that living standards are increasing in absolute terms, whereas relative mobility refers to the degree to which individuals move up or down compared to others in their cohort. Upward social mobility aspects of

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/apply-who.asp> accessed on May 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'poorest of the poor' refers to the persons who have the lowest per capita income. It also may include persons who even do not possess a homestead or who have lost all their savings and sources of earning.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, D. A. Sorokin, "Social and Cultural Mobility", in D. Grusky (ed.) *Social Stratification: Class, Race and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, Social Inequality Series, West View Press, Boulder, 1994; A. Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965; D. Bertaux and P. Thompson, (eds.) *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility*, Oxford University Press, London, 1997; C. Osella and F. Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, Pluto Press, London, Sterling, Virginia, 2000 ; and D. B. Grusky, *Social Stratification: Class, Race and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, West View Press, Boulder, 2001.

migrant households in Bangladesh will be discussed in this paper mostly within the above framework of intra-generational and relative aspects. The paper analyses the causes and consequences of the migrants' endeavours to achieve an upper social position than what they had before migration.

Working overseas as a means of radically enhancing one's own, and one's family's status is not unusual. Filippo and Caroline Osella<sup>12</sup> make a case for migration to the Gulf from Kerala, stating that it offers rapid and vast accumulation of capital by village standards, helping returnees forge a new identity, relations, and status through conspicuous consumption. Lefebvre<sup>13</sup>, describing the situation in two villages in Punjab, Pakistan, concludes that migration to the Gulf has led to the strengthening of traditional customs and kinship ties instead of transforming them. In discussing the impact of migration on the development of Mirpur, Pakistan, Ballard<sup>14</sup> argues that while transnational connections have channelled large amounts of capital into the pockets of farmers, the latter could not invest this in agriculture due to the lack of infrastructure. Migrants in Mirpur instead invested their money in the construction of enormous houses. Mills<sup>15</sup> informs us about Thai migrant women, whose idea of mobility is related to acquiring the lifestyle of the urban middle classes. In case of Bangladesh, Gardner<sup>16</sup> demonstrates that in Sylhet, involvement in international migration has led to increased economic and social differentiation. Those who had access to the resource of migration were able to transform their economic circumstances and use it to transform themselves into *Bhalamanush* (a good person), thus setting themselves apart from those who did not have such access.

This paper considers how rural Bangladeshis construct migration as means to earn capital, social status and success. In doing so, Bourdieu's<sup>17</sup> ideas of economic, cultural and symbolic capital and the distinction these create in 'social

---

<sup>12</sup> F. Osella and C. Osella, 1999, "From Transience to Immanence: Consumption, Life-Cycle and Social Mobility in Kerala, South India", *Modern Asian Studies*. Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 989-1020.

<sup>13</sup> A. Lefebvre, *Kinship, Honour and Money in Rural Pakistan*, Curzon, Richmond Surrey 1999, pp. 264-67.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ballard, "A Case of Capital-Rich Under-Development: The Paradoxical Consequences of Successful Transnational Entrepreneurship from Mirpur", in F. Osella and Gardner K., (eds.) *Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation in South Asia*, Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies 11, Thousand Oaks/Sage, New Delhi, London, 2003, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> M. B. Mills, "Engendering Discourses of Displacement Contesting Mobility and Marginality in Rural Thailand", *Ethnography*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2005, pp. 385-419.

<sup>16</sup> K. Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p.271.

<sup>17</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Routledge, Cambridge, New York, London, 1986.

space' have been borrowed. To Bourdieu<sup>18</sup>, it is the possession, use and conversion of economic and cultural capital which determine people's status within the society. According to Bourdieu<sup>19</sup>, society incorporates "symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, [...as] the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction". He emphasizes the dominance of cultural capital by stating that "differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes".<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu expands these ideas in the context of French upper and middle class. Yet, these are found to be useful in analysing low-income households' social mobility through migration.

### ***Informal Social Security***

Another concept which drives this paper is informal social security. Studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asian countries suggest that most households in low-income countries deal with economic hardships through informal insurance, arrangements arising between individuals and communities on a personalised basis, rather than through markets or states.<sup>21</sup> Drawing down savings, engaging in reciprocal gift exchange, buying and selling physical assets, and diversifying income-generating activities are some of the common strategies to build informal social safety net.

Perhaps, the most comprehensive analysis of informal social security in rural Bangladesh is provided by Geoffrey Wood. As he shows, like many other of the world's poorest countries, Bangladesh lacks an efficient government and/or pervasive formal labour market, both of which are preconditions for providing welfare to its citizens.<sup>22</sup> Poor governance and an inefficient market, Wood<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> See, H. Alderman and C. Paxson, "Do the Poor Insure? A Synthesis of the Literature on Risk Sharing Institutions in Developing Countries," in *Economics in a Changing World: Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of the International Economics Association*, MacMillan Press, Moscow/London, 1994; T. Besley, "Non-Market Institutions for Credit and Risk-Sharing in Low-Income Countries," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 115 – 127, 1995; J. Morduch, "Between the Market and State: Can Informal Insurance Patch the Safety Net", *WDR on Poverty and Development 2000/2001*, 1999; L. Haddad and M. Zeller, "How Can Safety Nets do more with Less? General Issues with Some Evidence from Southern Africa," *FCND Discussion Paper 16*, IFPRI, Washington, DC. 1996.

<sup>22</sup> G. Wood, "Informal Security Regimes: The Strengths of Relationship", in I. Gough *et al.* *Insecurity and Welfare Regimes in Asia, African and Latin America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> G. Wood, "Poverty, Capabilities and Perverse Social Capital: The Antidote to Sen and Putnam?", in I. A. Khan and J. Seeley (eds.), *Making a Living: The Livelihoods of the Rural Poor in Bangladesh*, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka, 2005, p. 10.

argues, have led to the creation of an informal security regime which reflects a set of conditions, where people have to rely heavily upon community and family relationships of various kinds as they cannot fulfil their needs from state or market. The ideas and practices regarding household development of labour migrants in rural Bangladesh are heavily reliant on this idea of building an informal social security.

### ***Social Mobility, Informal Security and Labour Migration***

The absence of well-functioning capital and formal credit facilities for poor people creates strong pressures for overseas migration as a strategy of capital accumulation. In the event of failing economic conditions, and a lack of productive activities to bring in sufficient income, overseas migration appears as a mechanism by which poorer households self-insure against local livelihood risks. However, an imperfect market and poor governance has created conditions that encourage families to reinvest in consumption and real property rather than in production. People undertake migration more as a means of controlling risk of uncertainty and poverty than of increasing productivity. Migrants are reluctant to invest their accumulated capital into business or agricultural productivities, because unlike wealthy countries, there is no insurance coverage against a poor harvest or in business. More crucially, the funds that are required to cover any loss incurred in business or agriculture may also be difficult to borrow because the household lacks collateral to qualify for a loan. It is not surprising, therefore, that successful migrants prefer to invest their money in building houses, buying land and strengthening their position within the kinship and the society, which they consider not only a culturally viable means to seek social status but also as a great source of informal security and protection.

## **4. HOUSEHOLD MOBILITY, STATUS AND SUCCESS IN LOCAL PERCEPTION**

In rural Bangladesh, households experience upward, downward or cyclical mobility depending on their asset base, their human capacities, the relations of surplus appropriation in which they participate, and the hazards of nature, demography and the market.<sup>24</sup> Van Schendel<sup>25</sup> has studied all these issues in detail and demonstrated that while there is a trend of ‘downward aggregate shifting of the peasantry as a whole, [there was] increasing differentiation of peasant households and household mobility’. Despite considerable economic differentiation within farming households in Bangladesh, there are certain

---

<sup>24</sup> See A. Abdullah (ed.), *Modernisation at Bay: Structure and Change in Bangladesh*, BIDS Studies in Development, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka, 1991, p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> W. Van Schendel W, *Peasant Mobility: The Odds of Life in Rural Bangladesh*, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1981, p. 287.

degrees of mobility between these groups.<sup>26</sup> First, upward mobility to the point of ‘depeasantisation’ took place after decolonisation, since the village elites for the first time got a chance to send household members into the army and state bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup> In addition to this, some new occupational groups have emerged in the villages including labour migrants, intermediaries, agricultural service providers such as pump-owners or tractor-owners, fertiliser traders and local politicians, all of whom maintain agricultural activities at the subsistence level, yet are capable of exerting considerable social and political power over the marginalised poor.<sup>28</sup>

Overseas labour migration is identified as one of the best possible options for upward mobility of poorer households in rural Bangladesh.<sup>29</sup> The author was told by many people in the villages that migration is ‘for savings and prosperity’ (*Aai-Unnotir jonno Bidesh kori*). The word *Unnoti* (success) has a wider meaning in the context of Bangladesh. *Unnoti* means more than the process of earning and saving money. Villagers use the word to indicate life, success and status, which involves accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital with the aim to attain freedom from the control and dominance of patrons and to gain the ability to exert power and influence over others. The definition of ‘success’ varies from person to person. In general, migrants who remit a sizable amount of cash for land purchase, household development and consumption are considered to be successful. At the household level, ‘success’ implies economic progress and its conversion into symbols of prestige, thereby gaining social recognition and status from others.

*Unnoti* is sometimes thus synonymous with material progress. For many poor households, remittances now constitute a major source of income, insurance and capital accumulation. However, to what extent this can lead to a better status depends on migrants’ ability to transform their financial resources into symbolic capital, which implies ‘the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability.’<sup>30</sup> This could result in the building of new houses,<sup>31</sup> buying of land or other displays of familial wealth through spending on social functions such as weddings<sup>32</sup> and other rituals.<sup>33</sup> Some of the

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263-266.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263-266.

<sup>28</sup> See K. A. Toufique and C. Turton, (eds.), *Hands not Land: How Livelihoods are Changing in Rural Bangladesh*, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Dhaka 2002; K. Westergaard and A. Hossain, *Boringram Revisited: Persistent Power Structure and Agricultural Growth in a Bangladeshi Village*, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Abdullah *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>31</sup> Ballard *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> T. Siddiqui, *Transcending Boundaries: Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka, 2001, p. 153.



most important ways migrants in the study villages convert their accumulated economic capital into symbolic capital are discussed as follows.

### ***Pacca Ghor (Brick Building)***

This study's analysis of migrants' success, 'house' appears as an important focus because 'brick buildings' or *Pacca ghor* have become an important sign of successful migration in many migrant villages in Bangladesh. The trend of making *pacca* houses by migrants in rural Bangladesh has increased to such an extent that people readily identify migrant villages by the high number of such houses.

Soon after the repayment of debt, migrants invest in the renovation or building of a new house. Houses built by the migrants in the study villages are not as enormous as those made by the expatriates in Sylhet.<sup>34</sup> Most of the brick houses in the study villages possess the following features: a one-storied building with a higher concrete floor, brick walls and corrugated iron at the top. A typical tin-shed brick house costs Tk.500,000 - 700,000. In most cases, migrants send payments over time as the non-migrant members of the household erect the house. Construction materials, especially sand and bricks are brought in during the monsoon by large motor boats which carry them directly to the premises of the house. However, it is not until the dry season that the construction work begins. Migrants usually hire local labourers for the construction work. This provides migrants with an additional opportunity to offer patronage. It takes a few months to complete a three/four-room house depending on the inflow of remittances.

By building houses, migrants show success in both ways - they can publicly display their economic capital and transform this into symbolic capital.<sup>35</sup> The value and the meaning these houses represent have to be understood in the local context. In a society where ninety percent of houses are made of bamboo and corrugated iron, brick buildings represent the owner's ability to consume better. However, it would be naive to consider a 'pacca house' only as a status symbol. In a flood and cyclone-prone country like Bangladesh, a *pacca* house provides residents with comfort and security. Some migrants also rent out their newly

---

<sup>33</sup> See F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Migration and the Commoditisation of Ritual: Sacrifice, Spectacle and Contestations in Kerala, India', F. Osella and K. Gardner (eds.) *Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation in South Asia*, Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies 11, Thousand Oaks/Sage Publication, New Delhi, London, 2003, pp. 109-140.

<sup>34</sup> See Gardner, K. and Z. Ahmed, "Place, Social Protection and Migration in Bangladesh: A Londoni Village in Biswanath," *Working Paper T18*, Development Research Centre for Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, UK, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> See F. Osella and C. Osella, 1999, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

built houses to ensure an extra source of earning for the household. Many migrant families justify renovation and construction of new houses or rooms as essential to attract prospective brides and grooms for their eligible sons and daughters.

### ***Buying Land, Buying Status***

The next thing to do for a migrant after debt payment, marriage of daughters and house building, is buying land. Indeed, in migration-intensive areas, overseas migrants constitute one of the main buyers of land. Before the 1980s, there was no price difference between cultivable land and a homestead in the study villages, whereas at present a homestead is 10 times costlier than arable land. The author was told that not many people in the villages had the ability to buy land at that time and hence the price was very low. The price of land has increased primarily as a result of the construction of the tarmac road, and the increase in the flow of cash in the area through remittances.

In reality, a significant portion of the current land transactions is occurring between would-be or failed migrants and successful migrants. Whilst would-be migrants sell their land to collect money for a visa and ticket, failed migrants sell their land to pay off loans and a successful migrant buys the land to strengthen his position. Similar trend can be observed among Gulf migrants in Kerala, India,<sup>36</sup> Sri Lanka<sup>37</sup> and Pakistan<sup>38</sup>.

Migrants belonging to the landless and functionally landless families usually buy cultivable land. Those who already own a few *Kani*<sup>39</sup> of agricultural land want to invest in habitable land. The price of land depends on the location and quality. Some land is too low lying to be used for cultivation and are only suitable for fish farming. This land costs Tk. 20,000 to 40,000 (£150-£300) per 1/3 acre. A piece of higher land of the same size, adjacent to the concrete road, costs Tk.1,000,000 (£7400) as it is easily accessible and ideal for building house or industry.

Some migrants have also bought land in nearby town or the outskirts of Dhaka. In reality, these migrants who are proud of having a 'reference point' in Dhaka acquire only a lower middle class status in relation to urban social stratification. However, given the huge disparities in village and urban middle class structure and standard of living, maintaining even a lower-middle class status by the rural people in Dhaka is considered by the villagers as a great step forward.

---

<sup>36</sup> F. Osella and C. Osella 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 146-150.

<sup>37</sup> M. R. Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaid*: Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2000, pp. 169-170.

<sup>38</sup> Ballard *op. cit.*, Lefebvre *op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> 1 *Kani*= .33 Acre.

This research suggests that there are economic, social and cultural reasons for buying land. First, migrants consider land purchasing as the safest investment given the lack of viable avenues of investment.<sup>40</sup> Land or *jomi* is a vitally important term to someone living in a village in Bangladesh. It not only means the physical space on which people build their houses, but more importantly, also indicates the space where they grow their crops and make their living. Another major reason behind investing in land is that land prices in Bangladesh show faster growth than bank interest rates, as is the case with many other migrant receiving communities in South Asia.<sup>41</sup> Table-1 shows that the land prices in the study area have increased almost thirty times over a period of forty years. This rate is three times higher than that in a non-migrant area in Comilla. Despite its low return from sharecropping, leasing, or mortgaging, land has always a higher resale value than other material property such as houses or agricultural equipments. This makes land work as insurance for bad days. The author came across a number of households who have sold the land they had bought after the first migration in order to pay off a loan after having failed in a second migration.

**Table 1: Progressive Increase of Cost of Land in Daudkandi, Comilla**

Period	Cultivable Land (.3 Acre)	Habitable Land (.3 Acre)
1960s	Tk. 3,000	Tk. 3,000
1980s	Tk. 15,000	Tk. 15,000
2000s	Tk. 80,000-100,000	Tk. 7,000,00-1,000,000

*Source: Based on the data collected by the author from the villagers during fieldwork*

The economic importance of land has made it a key instrument of social control.<sup>42</sup> It has been used traditionally as an instrument to exert political control, as well as to gain prestige and patronage in rural Bengal<sup>43</sup> and has thereby obtained considerable symbolic value. The root of this may be traced back to the history of unequal distribution of land over the last two thousand years when the feudal lords, Sultans, Mughals and the British ruled Bengal.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See T. Siddiqui and C. R. Abrar, "Migrant Workers' Remittances and Micro Finance in Bangladesh", *Working Paper*, No. 38, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2003, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, F. Osella and C. Osella, 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> See for example, A. Chowdhury, *A Bangladeshi Village: A Study of Social Stratification*, Centre for Social Studies, Dhaka, 1979; A. Rahman, *Peasants and Classes: A Study in Differentiation in Bangladesh*, Zed Books, London/New Jersey, 1986; and Gardner 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 72-75.

<sup>43</sup> S. Bose, 'Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770', *The New Cambridge History of India*, Vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> T. Mukherjee, "The Co-ordinating State and the Economy: The Nizamat in Eighteenth-Century Bengal", *Modern Asian Studies*, Published online by Cambridge

Essentially, land remains central to social status and power in rural Bangladesh even in the post-independent era.<sup>45</sup> It seems that social power and status is directly proportional to the amount of land one owns. Jansen<sup>46</sup> argued that the more land a farmer owns, the more influential he is in the society and the easier it is for him to expand his landholdings further by taking over land from poorer farmers. Things have not changed much since Jansen did his research. Land is still central to socio-economic status in the villages. Asked about the impact of migration on her family status, Momota<sup>47</sup>, a mother of three migrants to Italy, said that they have bought a piece of land in Daudkandi (town) and have also bought 3 acre of land besides the *pacca* road.”

One must also take into account the emotional attachment of people towards their ancestor’s property.<sup>48</sup> Failed migrants often expressed their disappointment by saying that they have ‘ruined’ (*noshto*) their ancestor’s land for *Bidesh*. It appears that selling land for whatever reason is a painful experience especially for small holding groups. Ancestral land is not only a physical space, it connotes the very identity and history of the family concerned. A deep sense of pride and regret could be observed when these people say that once they had plenty of land. It could, therefore, be suggested that when migrants try to rebuild their property with remittances it is not solely for economic reasons. Perhaps, it is profoundly rooted in their aspirations to regain the glory of the past.

### ***Large Spending on Social Occasions***

Apart from building houses and buying land, migrants spend a large amount of money at social and religious festivals. Villagers who are relatively well endowed with remittances but not well integrated into the social life of the middle class or well-off families in the villages, invest in cultural practices in order to elevate their standing, just as French buy into certain styles of ‘distinction’.<sup>49</sup> For example, Rokeya<sup>50</sup> (24), sister of Shaheb Ali<sup>51</sup>, a migrant in Saudi Arabia, informed the author that they are unable to lease in any land for subsistence farming because they had to spend all their money on a bull for *Kurbani* (Sacrifice). This choice of spending money on *Kurbani* is not so much to perform religious duties *per se* as it is for the good standing of their family. As neighbours say, “They have decided so; otherwise people will say, ‘What kind of

---

University Press 2008, available at: <http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php>, accessed on July 2008.

<sup>45</sup> E. G. Jansen, *Rural Bangladesh: Competition for Scarce Resources*, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka 1987, pp. 297-300.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>47</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>48</sup> Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>49</sup> See Bourdieu, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>50</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>51</sup> Not his real name.

migration is Shaheb Ali doing? He does not even manage to send money for *Kurbani*?" Rokeya and Ali actually belong to one of the poorest families in their village. Rokeya's father was a small farmer when she was a child. Her father was suffering from mental illness. One day he disappeared from the village and never came back. He left behind his wife, a daughter and two sons in tremendous hardship. Rokeya was only seven at that time and her mother started making a living by working in other people's houses in *Jhumpur*. In return, they used to get food, money and patronage. The household got its first opportunity to break the cycle of poverty when Ali grew up and went to Saudi Arabia with the patronage of his kin. To this household, which had always been dependent on other's patronage for their survival, *Kurbani* is a good opportunity to show its economic self-sufficiency. In the villages, *Kurbani* is a marker of social status because it is an occasion when the poorest section of the community receives donations from the wealthier households in the form of clothes, food (a portion of sacrificed animals), and cash. The ability to sacrifice automatically identifies a household as a 'giver' rather than a 'receiver'.

Again, funerals and death anniversaries are occasions where people prove their ability to spend money. In case of the death of parents, it is the responsibility of the sons to organise the funeral and feed as many people as possible. On average, 10,000 to 15,000 Taka (£75-£110) is spent for a funeral in village. Professional cooks are hired to prepare a feast and villagers are fed with utmost care. The obligation on migrant son/sons is far greater than on their non-migrant siblings due to their higher earnings. Wedding celebrations are another opportunity to invest in reputation and status.<sup>52</sup> Often people determine the status of a family by seeing their expenditure on food, the invitees, and the quality and quantity of food served. The bigger the feast, the more it makes an impression on people's minds about the economic capability of the organiser.

For many households in the study villages, one of the primary reasons for migration is to accumulate dowry for daughters. Customarily, parents receive help from wealthy relatives, but for those who have migrated remittances have considerably reduced such dependence on relatives. Now, many poorer families depend on migrant kin for their dowries and other marriage expenses for their daughters. After the marriage of her husband's sister, Shapla<sup>53</sup> told the author: "At last, he (her husband) has finished one of his main duties. Now we will be able to think about other things." In this marriage, the groom's side demanded Tk.40,000 (£280) as dowry and Shapla's husband paid the amount in two installments within six months from his earnings abroad. Whatever be his salary, a migrant can borrow from his fellow Bangladeshis abroad when a large sum is required and pay it back from his monthly earnings.

---

<sup>52</sup> See Lefebvre *op.cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>53</sup> Not her real name.

Talking to a number of parents, the author got the impression that the daughters and sisters of migrants have a special value in the marriage market since their fathers or brothers can afford dowries. This is illustrated by Aleya's<sup>54</sup> story. While her husband was away, she and her brother arranged a marriage for her daughter. The groom came from a southern district of Bangladesh and was working in a government office at Daudkandi. The author asked her "How much do you need to pay as dowry?" She replied, "I have given a pair of (gold) earrings. They (groom's side) have given a necklace and bangles. I promised some furniture but not now, only on her father's arrival. They will wait since they know that he (her husband) is earning money abroad." In this case, Aleya's daughter could marry a man from a higher status family due to her father's migration.

Some migrant families in the study villages spend as much as Tk.150,000 to Tk.200,000 on marriages. This sum includes dowry, some personal clothes and gifts to the groom, gifts for groom's relatives (mostly *saris*), utensils, furnitures etc. The cost of marriage is thus five to ten times the amount they earn per month abroad. Yet, people invest in marriage because in the cultural context of Bangladesh, a *Bhalo biya* (good marriage) is not only a status symbol for the family but also contributes to the economic and social security of the bride.

To sum up, spending *Bideshi taka* (foreign money) on brick buildings, land ownership and conspicuous consumption, all these have set a new standard of success and status in the villages which is directly related to people's migration to *Bidesh*.

## 5. COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITY AND STATUS

To the people in rural Bangladesh, who have never travelled abroad, *Bidesh* is a highly idealised and romanticised term where everything is 'nice and pleasant' (*Bhalo*) and better than Bangladesh.<sup>55</sup> Over the decades, television media and imported goods have played an important role in forging people's idea about *Bidesh* as a land of 'wealth'. However, the most important role is played by the migrants themselves, who through their narratives, attitude and gifts, have been able to create a positive image of *Bidesh*. In the words of Werbner<sup>56</sup>, labour migration forges routes along which people, goods, places and ideas travel.

The image of *Bidesh* is so positive in the study villages that the word migration (*Bidesh Kora*) implies a high-status occupation irrespective of the actual nature of the jobs migrants have abroad. The phrase *Bidesh kora* (doing migration) means more than earning a livelihood abroad. It implies migrants'

---

<sup>54</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>55</sup> See Gardner, *op.cit.*, pp.16-17.

<sup>56</sup> P. Werbner, "Global Pathways: Working Class Cosmopolitans and the Creation of Transnational Ethnic Worlds", *Social Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1999, pp.17-35.

exposure to an affluent and outside world and the opportunity to experience a cosmopolitan life. On a number of occasions, the author was told by visiting or returnee migrants: “I had been cherishing a desire to go to *Bidesh* since my childhood and Allah has given me that opportunity.” This indicates a willingness to ‘engage with the others’ and experience a cosmopolitan life.<sup>57</sup> Vertovec and Cohen<sup>58</sup> define cosmopolitanism as ‘certain socio-cultural processes or individual behaviours, values or descriptions manifesting a capacity to engage cultural multiplicity.’ A ‘cosmopolitan’ person is believed to be prone to articulate complex affiliations, meaningful attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, people, places and traditions that lie beyond the boundaries of the residential nation-state.<sup>59</sup> Cosmopolitanism also implies the ability to stand outside of having one’s life written and scripted by any one community whether that is a faith or tradition or religion or culture.<sup>60</sup> It means widening of consciousness and confrontation with alterity.<sup>61</sup>

There is however, a debate over whether labour migrants are cosmopolitan given the fact that they build their own cultural worlds in the country of employment. Werbner<sup>62</sup> argues that cosmopolitanism is a class-based phenomenon and there are multiple modalities of cosmopolitanism. Nonini<sup>63</sup> argues that labour migrants develop their own form of ‘working class cosmopolitanism’, which is different from that of elites.’ To Werbner, in its fundamental sense, cosmopolitanism implies openness to strangers and strangerhood or differences<sup>64</sup>, and labour migrants become cosmopolitan as they gain knowledge and familiarity with other cultures and acquire new patterns of commodity consumption and desire in their migratory experience.<sup>65</sup> In their attempt to cope with the cultural and national differences between their places of origin and their destinations, labour migrants develop new habits, a new life style in a different socio-cultural setting, and discipline, food and other consumption brings about behavioural changes within the migrants.<sup>66</sup> According to her,

---

<sup>57</sup> U. Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 252.

<sup>58</sup> S. Vertovec. and R. Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002. p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>62</sup> Werbner, *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> D. Nonini, “Shifting Identities, Positioned Imaginaries: Transnational Traversals and Reversals by Malaysian Chinese”, in A. Ong and D. Nonini (eds.), *Underground Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, Routledge, London, 1997, cited in Werbner, 1999, *op.cit.*

<sup>64</sup> Werbner, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

international migration from any particular society follows a series of hierarchically ordered pathways, along which many different nations travel, meet and interact, getting to know one another in the intimate context of work side-by-side.<sup>67</sup>

As far as migrants in study villages are concerned, these new subjectivities and identities are mostly apparent in their ability to speak Arabic and Hindi, and their attire as well as their knowledge about the migration process and different destinations. Fresh returnees in the villages are easily distinguishable from stay behinds by their attire - new clothes, shoes and relatively expensive wrist watches. Some migrants even like to show off gold necklaces. Again, it has become a norm that a returnee would bring valuable gifts such as gold jewellery, mobile phones, wrist watches, toiletries, blankets, clothing, televisions and various other electronic items for kin, neighbours and friends. These foreign goods have huge social and symbolic value making their bearers as *Bideshi*.

Citing examples of Indian rural people who experience circular migration between rural and urban places for a livelihood and retain a significant involvement with places of origin (rural homelands), Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan<sup>68</sup> note that cosmopolitanism involves straddling two cultural worlds and transmitting sensibilities, ideas, materials and techniques in both the places through geographical movements - 'a cosmopolitan is a person who disrupts conventional spatial divisions and produces newly salient spaces of work, pleasure, habitation and politics.' The authors show that urban existence gives circular migrants leverage over how they are able to negotiate rural social relations and an imagination of urbanity. The same could be said for overseas migrants in the study villages of this study, although their transformative capacities might be qualitatively different from Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's urban migrants. As it has been already shown, migration provides the villagers an opportunity to be engaged in the culture of the villages by enabling them to continue to spend money on gifts and social occasions. Investing in material resources such as houses and land not only shows migrants' continuing affinity with village life, but also the possibility of reconstituting their social position.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is argued in this paper that overseas labour migration in Bangladesh is more than a livelihood strategy; it is a wider project whereby people expect to

---

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> V. Gidwani and K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India", in F. Osella and K. Gardner (eds.) *Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation in South Asia*, Contributions to India Sociology, Occasional Studies 11, Thousand Oaks/Sage, New Delhi, London, 2003, pp. 339-367.



accumulate economic, social and cultural capitals which are fundamental to their survival and upward mobility.

The possibilities of economic prosperity, upward mobility and status improvement are some of the most powerful images that shape the desires and expectations of overseas labour migration of Bangladeshis. A positive image of *Bidesh* is continuously being produced by the attitudes of the returnees and their narratives and foreign goods carried by them. For some migrants, *Bidesh* turned out to be not a mere myth, but a reality which has fulfilled desires such as building a house, buying land, conspicuous consumption, and thereby moving up to the social ladder. Successful migrants and their symbols of achievement have created a model or standard of progress in the villages that many non-migrants desire to achieve.

In a development perspective, investment of remittances for building houses, boosting kinship ties and status seeking may appear as unproductive and irrational. But people in Bangladesh have a different logic. In a situation where the State is unable to provide formal insurance and guarantees of wellbeing, people always feel the need to secure their position within the society via their investment in social capital. Indeed, the extent to which overseas migration can be a route to self-sustaining progress for people and the state depends largely on an efficient infrastructure. Well designed and carefully implemented formal protection and insurances enable migrants to avoid a vicious cycle of risk management through an informal safety net allowing them to invest in productive cycles.

Both the State and private sector can contribute significantly to this end. The State should be transparent and honest in implementing its overseas employment policy and protection policies for migrants. Insurance policies should be introduced to cover the migrants from the risk of sudden unemployment. The State needs to ensure the best use of the wage earner's welfare fund in this regard. Bangladesh Embassies abroad should help migrant realise the compensation from their employers in cases of accident, injury, disability, and sudden lay off. Any attempt on the part of private insurance companies to improve the scenario must take into account the experiences of the migrant communities and recognise migrants' needs first. They may offer migrants need specific policies i.e., crop insurance, insurance for small business etc. which will allow migrants to invest their remittances in productive cycles. Most importantly, State should take initiative such as loan to develop small and medium entrepreneurship, which may create an environment for most effective utilisation of migrants' remittances.