

# CHAPTER ONE

## AN INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Thesis

#### The Case of Monir Mia: A Bangladeshi Migrant in Singapore

Md. Monir Mia came to Singapore from Munshiganj, a migration-specific district in Bangladesh, in the second half of 1997. He was then 32 and married with a four-year-old son. Mr. Monir was happy to be in Singapore. “Everyone goes to Middle East. How many people can migrate to Singapore? It is not easy to come to Singapore. One needs a large amount of cash and close relatives in Singapore. I paid around Taka 200,000<sup>1</sup> as *chalan*<sup>2</sup> (financial investment) for my migration. I borrowed money from moneylenders, my parents sold out a piece of arable land, and my relatives also came to help me financially.

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<sup>1</sup> Taka is the name of Bangladesh Currency (US\$ 1= Taka 48 in late 1990s).

<sup>2</sup> *Chalan* is a Bengali word which usually means the investment cost for any small business. Small traders in rural Bangladesh often use the word ‘*chalan*’. Migrants in Singapore frequently use this term to refer to their financial cost of migration. I use this term in my thesis to imply the financial cost of migration.

Singapore is a busy city. No one cares about what type of work I do. I had a difficult time when I was in Bangladesh. I had only 10 years of schooling. A respectable job was a distant dream for a person like me. I could do some sort of blue color job at local economies. In my *Bari*<sup>3</sup> (group of families), no one engaged in those types of work. How could I do those types of work? I had a family to care for, a *Bari* and a lineage to be proud of. How could I destroy the prestige of my lineage? Everyone respects our *Bari* members. My father was a *Matobbor* (village headman). My grandfather went for Hajj, the first person from my village to do so. I am not the only one from my lineage in Singapore. There are 17 individuals from our *Mia Bari*.

Although *bideshi*<sup>4</sup> (overseas) job is prestigious, it is not easy to make money from working in *bidesh*. Few people can earn enough money to do something in Bangladesh. I am working hard to earn as much as I can. Family members

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<sup>3</sup> *Bari* is a Bengali word which denotes a group of families sharing the same courtyard (see for details in Chapter Four). Members of the *Bari* are generally blood related and belong to same lineage. The reputation of *Bari* depends on the action, vocation and achievement of *Bari* members. It is the moral and social responsibility of the *Bari* members to uphold the *Bari* tradition over the individual interests. Every *Bari* has its own name, which usually comes from the lineage name, for example, *Mia Bari*, *Sikder Bari* or *Mridha Bari*. See for details about *Bari*, Wood, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> *Bidesh* is a Bengali word which means 'foreign land'. Katy Gardner (1995) first used this term to denote the local perception of foreign land among the Sylheti Bangladeshis. Rural Bangladeshis use the terms *desh* (home country) and *bidesh* (foreign land) with a different connotation; for details, see Chapter Four. The general perception about 'bidesh' in Bangladesh is that if any one wants to be rich, he must go to 'bidesh'. W.G. Huff (1994:151) reports the same perception of international migration in China. In the nineteenth and early decades of twentieth century in South China, the dominant perception was that, to make 'money' especially big money, one should migrate to Nanyang (Southeast Asia).

back home expect too much from me. They think money grows on trees in Singapore. I do not know whether I can recover my *chalan* within the two-year contract period. I am still lucky. Many people are being cheated by *Dalals*<sup>5</sup> (brokers or intermediaries who help in migration procedures). If I had invested the same *chalan* in Bangladesh, I could have benefited much. I could also stay with my family. Who does not want to be with his son? I keep contact with my family regularly. My wife along with my son visits a particular private STD and ISD phone shop in my local town regularly to receive my phone calls”. (Interviewed in 1998, Singapore)

The narrative of Mr. Monir Mia is not an isolated case. His experience is representative of some of the trends in contemporary Bangladeshi labour migration. For instance, migration entails heavy financial cost beyond the immediate economic means of families. A prospective migrant uses social and symbolic ties to raise funds needed to defray the financial cost of migration. An individual from a higher status group will encounter occupational restriction to join in the status-inconsistent work, but once he is on foreign soil, he is free from such status restriction<sup>6</sup>. Migration to Singapore is confined to some pockets in Bangladesh. There is an illusion of transformative power of

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<sup>5</sup> *Dalal* is a Bengali word which means broker. The term ‘*Dalal*’ refers to people who assist in migration procedures without legitimate authority to do so. A recruiting agent is not a *Dalal*. When a recruiting agent uses other people to persuade prospective migrants, Bangladeshi migrants usually call these other people *Dalals*. For more details, see Chapter Five and Seven.

<sup>6</sup> Piore (1979) uses the term ‘immigrant work’ to refer to “3D” type of labour considered dangerous, dirty and demeaning in the developed countries. This type of work is usually taken up by the foreigners. Natives feel degrading to join in this type of work. However, this thesis reveals that this notion of work also exists in the home country of the migrants, and prohibits them from entering the local 3D labour market. Details will be discussed in Chapter Four.

*bidesh*, where migration is seen as a status symbol. In reality, it is a risky venture that does not always lead to economic gain and prosperity. Many migrants cannot even recover the economic cost of migration. Finally, migration does not dissociate migrants from their families. These trends provide an insight into the complexities of recent migration motivation in Bangladesh.

Generally, every year thousands of Bangladeshi migrants come to Singapore for work<sup>7</sup> and presently there are roughly 50,000<sup>8</sup> Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore. Singapore relies heavily on foreign workers for economic development. Singapore follows clear policies to discourage foreign manual workers from settling in the country, and to prevent local employers from becoming dependent on them. Thus, labour migration to Singapore is truly of temporary nature. This thesis is on the temporary labour migration. In temporary migration, a migrant stays in a host country on a short-term basis. His identity is rooted in the society he left behind. It does not lead to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Figure 3.4 in Chapter Three

<sup>8</sup> The actual number of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore is not available from the Bangladeshi source (Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Bangladesh) because of the lack of sophisticated mechanisms in maintaining records of returnees. The total number of Bangladeshi workers is not also available from the Singapore source (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore). I used Newspaper report (*The Straits Times*, Singapore) and personal observation to guess the total number of Bangladeshi migrant population in Singapore. First, I made an observation at Little India, where Bangladeshi migrants gather on Sundays. It would be approximately between 25,000 and 35,000 who usually gather at Little India on every Sunday. Finally, newspaper reporting is considered, like "Every year, about 70,000 foreign construction workers come to Singapore, mainly from Bangladesh, India and Thailand" or "Every year, more than 30,000 Bangladeshi workers sell their land and cattle, and borrow money so that they can come here (Singapore)" (18 December 1999, "The Journey of Hope" *Straits Times*). Based on available published data and my personal observation, I guess that there have been around 50,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore in any given year since the late 1990s.

dissociation from the home country as remittance plays an important role in bridging the migrants and their families. Labour migration is just one strategy - aside from marriage, education, and house-building - that individuals and families attempt to reinvent themselves. Therefore, any analysis of temporary migration must involve viewing migration as a social process in which social as well as economic influences receive adequate attention.

This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of male Bangladeshi transient migrant workers in Singapore<sup>9</sup> by pursuing a two-end approach -sending and receiving ends. This thesis examines the factors that motivate individuals to decide to migrate, and explains some relevant issues related to Bangladeshi labour migration to Singapore - for instance, the social organization of migration, living and working conditions of foreign workers in Singapore, costs and benefits of migration from migrants' viewpoint, and the effects of emigration on the migrants and their families in their home countries. Although labour migration research in Asia has produced abundant literature on other traditional Asian source countries such as the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Thailand, research on Bangladeshi labour migration has remained mostly inadequate. This study attempts to fill the lacunae.

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<sup>9</sup> This thesis deals with Bangladeshi male migrant workers because Bangladeshi migration to Singapore is mainly a male phenomenon. Although some females migrated to some other Southeast Asian countries, for example Malaysia, female migration to Singapore was restricted to a handful of domestic helpers. However, even that ended in late 1998 with the ban imposed on female migration by the Government of Bangladesh since 1998. Given the costs of air travel, strict foreign worker recruitment policy, and law enforcement mechanisms, unauthorized female migration to Singapore is virtually impossible.

In general, research on labour migration has experienced an excessive domination by economic explanation during the last several decades. Econometric analysis has been such a dominant factor in the studies of international labour migration that the very language of analysis tends to marginalize social or cultural factors. This thesis examines international temporary labour migration, demystifies the myth that migration is purely the result of poverty and overpopulation, and rejects the oversimplified explanations based on "push-pull" models and the one-sided flow inherent in such models. I argue that it is inadequate to examine migration decision-making in terms of neoclassical economic theories, which assume "rational, self-interested behaviour affected minimally by social relations" (Granovetter, 1985:481). Past studies have not adequately analyzed the ways in which migration decisions are constituted through various noneconomic forces, for example, beliefs, values, culture of honour, notion of work, status and relative status and resources available in social and symbolic ties.

Migration to Singapore is limited to a few out of the 64 districts in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2000). Everyone, especially in the Singapore migration-specific districts in Bangladesh, is enmeshed in the illusion of transformative power of *bidesh* (foreign land). The possibility of changing one's destiny is the single driving force that pushes people into a precarious journey. There is desperation for overseas migration and what Gardner (1995) describes as 'migration mania', an ideology, "which equates all success with *bidesh*, and lack of opportunity and stagnation with *desh* (homeland)". Migration has been deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviour and values associated with migration have become part of the community's values. Those who do not attempt to change their destiny through migration are considered lazy, unenterprising, and undesirable.

The thesis strongly suggests that if one wishes to understand the migration process - especially the complex motivational aspect of migration - it is important to appreciate the social and cultural contexts within which individuals make the decision to migrate. The Singapore dream, especially in the Singapore migration-specific districts, has become a form of escapism for those who have never been outside Bangladesh. Honour and prestige play a very important role in the social structure of Bangladesh. Social norms and values uphold the 'culture of honour' – a culture where displays of risk-taking and fortune-seeking behaviour (like migration) in males are highly valued and where males are prepared to do whatever is needed to defend their status as honorable men. Given these socio-cultural settings, seeking employment in Singapore has become a norm among young men, who do not consider themselves manly without having attempted to stay some time in Singapore. I will, therefore, argue that migration decision-making is rooted in the cultural practices of the society.

In recent decades, labour migration in Asia has been a perilous venture for migrants. Migration to Singapore is not risk-free as well. Many of the migrants end up in a worse position than when they started. These unsuccessful migrants return home in debt, unable to repay the loans initially taken for their migration. Many of these unsuccessful migrants are willing to migrate again. When asked why they want to migrate again, they said "we have to keep on trying". The risk of losing everything is less important than the chance of going abroad in search of 'fortune'. Although families' motivation for migration may seem irrational from an economic point of view, I argue that for the migrant families, the 'gamble' of selling all the families' lands and the

attempt to buy a contract for overseas employment is perfectly rational if we explain the phenomenon from the broader rational choice perspective.

In recent years, international migration has been a status symbol. In general, families see migration as a part of the broader strategy. They regard international movement as a social mobility strategy. Through status enhancement, international migration contributes to the increase in the social capital of families – a resource which can be converted to other forms of capital in need. Thus, the rationale for migration has been deeply embedded in the community perception. The family bears enormous importance in Bangladeshi society: individuals are known to the outside world as the members of a particular family, *Bari*, and lineage. Although almost all migrant workers move overseas as individuals, I argue that the actual decision-making process often involves the family and *Bari* and the migrant views his trip not only for his own well-being but also for the well-being of his whole family and *Bari*. The thesis looks into the complex interrelationships between the family, *Bari* and international migration.

A few districts in Bangladesh send the bulk of migrants to Singapore. This points to the role of migrant networks. Many researchers have already referred to the importance of migrant networks, especially kinship or family ties, in the migration process (see, Boyd, 1989; Kritiz and Zlotnik, 1992; Massey et al. 1987; Hugo, 1998). However, previous studies have not investigated this uneven migration pattern in the context of Bangladesh. International migration is founded on social structures. It is a social process inherently organized through networks and forged through everyday interpersonal connections. Therefore, this thesis examines the social bases of

Bangladeshi migration. It also explores the formation and functions of migrant networks in the context of Bangladeshi migration to Singapore.

Migration literature is replete with explanations of causes, consequences and, most recently, factors contributing to the perpetuation of labour migration. However, migration scholars have tended to neglect the working and living conditions of foreign migrant workers. Even if we are more aware of the often precarious circumstances in which the migrants find themselves while in manpower receiving-countries, systematic researches are inadequate on this topic. This research documents the social life of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. The thesis investigates in particular, the socio-economic backgrounds of migrants and their recruitment procedures, working environment, incomes, expenditure patterns, and leisure activities.

When I started working for this dissertation in mid-1998, the 1997 Asian financial crisis<sup>10</sup> had led to the massive deportation of foreign workers in the East and Southeast Asia. The Asian crisis that hit Singapore mainly in 1998 caused serious hardship for foreign workers in Singapore as well. Foreign unskilled construction

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<sup>10</sup> Asian financial crisis first hit Thailand in July 1997, spread quickly to other Asian countries. The crisis has affected the economics of migrant receiving countries in this region severely. Unemployment rates rose in almost all affected countries. To preserve jobs for their citizens, labour-importing countries such as Malaysia and South Korea repatriated a big portion of their foreign workers. Although Singapore did not deport foreign workers largely because of the government policy of retaining skilled workers regardless of nationality, a considerable volume of unskilled workers faced cancellation of work-permits and deportation. According to one estimate, around 16,800 foreign workers were supposed to lose their work-permits in 1998; for details, see Chapter Seven.

workers<sup>11</sup> were largely the victims<sup>12</sup> of the crisis. Ironically, Bangladeshis constituted the bulk of the unskilled construction workers during the crisis. Apart from this, a new wave of Bangladeshi migrants<sup>13</sup> who came between 1997 and 1998 made the situation worse. Although I see the Asian crisis as an unforeseen event and it does not match directly with the main thrust of my thesis; however, given the time and location, it is important to document the plight of Bangladeshi migrants during the Asian crisis. I address two important issues here - identifying the impact of this crisis on the migrants and examining why they migrated to Singapore during the economic slowdown in the region.

In the prolific literature on international migration, economists have largely relied on cost-benefit analysis to show the rationality of migration. This thesis offers a cost-benefit analysis of labor migration from migrants' point of view. Scholars identify several types of costs and benefits of migration. Costs of migration can include direct transportation costs, information costs, psychic costs, and opportunity costs in forgone earnings while moving and looking for a new job, and financing costs (costs because of arranging transportation). Benefits of migration include financial benefits in the form of remittances, improved amenities, and improved human capital. Evaluating the economic benefits of migration is a disputed topic. Some of the scholars have talked about

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<sup>11</sup> Unskilled construction workers were largely victim of this financial crisis as skilled workers were protected by reducing levy from SG \$ 100 to 30 while the levy for unskilled workers remained same (SG\$ 470).

<sup>12</sup> By the victim of financial crisis, the thesis means those workers whose work permits were cancelled prematurely. After the cancellation of work permits, workers were bound by law to leave the country within a week or few weeks (with special pass).

multiplier effects of remittances to show the (indirect) positive effects of labour migration (see, Papademetriou and Martin, 1991). Although I acknowledge the importance of different types of costs and benefits, I will look specifically into the ‘financial cost and benefit’ of labour migration.

In general, labour-exporting countries see international labour migration as a short-cut to development because of its role in unemployment relief, balance of payment relief, and capital formation at national level. The empirical analysis of the effects of emigration has produced abundant literature relying on various models of impact analysis (see Adepoju, 1991; Tapinos, 1982; Papademetriou and Martin, 1991). The thesis examines the effects of labour migration at a village in Bangladesh. I argue that we can better understand the causes and effects of emigration only when we place the process within its local context as what may prove to be advantageous to a national aggregate may prove to be disadvantageous to an individual or family, and vice-versa. This thesis examines the impact of labour migration on the migrants and their families as they are the main actors in the migration process and they are supposed to be the main beneficiaries of the fruit of migration<sup>14</sup>. After assessing the existing models and their inadequacies, I develop an improved model to the impact-analysis.

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<sup>13</sup> Approximately 27,659 new Bangladeshi came to Singapore between July 1997 and May 1998. This is an official figure, given by Bangladesh Government source, BMET (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training), 1999; for details, see Chapter Seven

<sup>14</sup> The data on inflow of remittances presented in Chapter Three offers a general trend of remittance flow. My argument is that national aggregate figure may not be a right indicator for assessing the economic benefit of migration for the migrants and their families. The increase of volume of remittances may be a sign of gain at the national aggregate; overall, it does not mean that migrants and their families gain from migration. Micro level studies can only reveal the fact.

## Research on the Bangladeshi migration

In the following discussion, I review literature on Bangladeshi labour migration<sup>15</sup>. The purpose of this literature review is to locate the under-researched areas of labour migration and thus highlight the contribution that this thesis will make to our understanding of Bangladeshi temporary labour migration. While research on permanent migration (see, Gardner's, 1990; Knights, 1996; Baluja, 2003; Billah, 1994; Blackledge, 2001; Carey and Shukur, 1985; Dale et al. 2002; Eade, 1997; Gillan, 2002; Kabeer, 2000; Khanum, 2001), refugee migration (Khondker, 1995), trafficking (Firoze, 1997; Shamim, 1997; Blanchet, 2002) have produced considerable literature in the recent years, research on temporary labour migration has remained largely inadequate. The existing literature on labour migration broadly deals with the consequences of migration for Bangladesh (Ali, 1981; Hossain, 1986; Abdul-Aziz 2001; Mahmood, 1991a, 1994a, 1994b; Ahmed, 1993; Haque, 1984; Ahmed, S., 1998; Hadi, 2001; Siddiqui, 2001; Islam, 1980; Islam *et. al.* 1987; Habib, 1985; Islam, 1995, 1988; Osmani, 1986; Mahmood, 1991b). A detailed description of some of the studies relevant to my thesis is given below.

Chowdhury Emdadul Haque (1984) conducted one of the pioneering works on labour migration. Haque explains Bangladeshi labour migration to the Middle East from the structural perspective. He identifies the patterns of labour migration and examines critically some of the hypotheses concerning the positive implications on the labour

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<sup>15</sup> I have provided a review of international migration researches in 'Chapter Two'. This review of migration researches will offer a clear picture about the inadequacy of theoretical development and empirical research on temporary labour migration at the international level. In doing so, I will justify the significance of my research.

sending society. He reports that the hypotheses of positive effects of labour export on the underdeveloped countries are invalid when concrete situations are analyzed. His analysis reveals that labour migration contributes to continued exploitation. Haque links labour migration to the macro-organization of socioeconomic relations, the geographic division of labour, and the political mechanisms of power and domination. Family and village-level researches conducted in the Third World context (Hugo, 1981, 1975; Amin, 1974; Titus, 1978; Cardona and Simmons, 1975; Pertierra, 1992) confirm that structural factors are of importance in causing individuals and groups to migrate. However, it must be pointed out that if one is to understand the migration process, it is important to have an appreciation of the social and cultural contexts within which these forces work and is perceived by the people involved.

Ali et al. (1981) describe the trend of Bangladeshi migration to the Middle East. Islam (1980) examines the impact of remittance money on the household expenses in Bangladesh. Islam *et. al.* (1987) looks into the causes of international labour migration from rural Bangladesh. Islam and his colleagues mainly focus on the economic factors. Habib (1985) examines the economic consequences of international migration for Bangladesh. Hossain (1986) examines the effects of labour migration on the class structure of rural Bangladesh. The higher financial cost of migration to the Middle East countries led him to conclude that Middle East migration was confined to the landed classes in Bangladesh. He reports that migration to the Middle East was confined to those elements of the population who have education, skills, wealth, and a substantial amount of land. He shows how through migration the wealthier landowning class in the rural areas has consolidated and strengthened its traditional position. His findings

suggest that emigration, in reality, has functioned as a mechanism to reinforce the age-old class structure of rural Bangladesh.

There are some other impact-studies carried out in the late 1980s. For example, Osmani (1986) finds out the economic and non-economic impact of labour migration at the micro level. Mahmood (1991b) examines the impact of international labour migration at macro level. In another work, Mahmood (1991a) demonstrates the problems and prospects of reabsorbing the returning migrants in national economy. Based on a sample survey on a selected number of migrants who have returned from the Middle East, the study analyzed the experiences of these migrants during the preparatory period, their stay abroad, and the nature of their readjustment and re-assimilation on the return. With the work on labour migration, work on the permanent migration in relation to the home country was also carried out side by side. For example, Katy Gardner's (1990) work on Bangladeshi permanent migration to London dealt with *Londonis* (Bangladeshis who live in London), their villages in Bangladesh (mainly from greater Sylhet district), and the ways in which life there has been altered.

Gardner focuses the impact of *Londoni* migration on the village life in Bangladesh. Based on ethnographical village study, she has showed the increasing dominance and importance of overseas in village life there. More than economic changes, her focus was on the qualitative shifts in perception, and outlook of local people, the ways in which social institutions have changed relationships between groups and individuals, and the new culture of migration. Gardner (1992) shows that migration has not led to economic development in the sending area; instead it has prompted 'migration mania' - a situation where foreign countries are invested in and glorified to the

detriment of the homeland. In another work (1993), she illustrates the local images of home and abroad in Bangladesh. She reports that while the 'homeland' refers to spirituality and religiosity, 'abroad' is linked to material bounty and economic transformation, and local desire has become centred on travel abroad as the only route to material prosperity. Her works broadly enrich our anthropological understanding of the effects of permanent migration on the sending region.

Although Gardner dealt with permanent migration and its impact on the village life, her work provides details about the perception of overseas migration by villagers. The concepts she developed (for example, *desh*, *bidesh*, migration mania) are relevant for understanding temporary migration as well. In the mid-1990s, clandestine Bangladeshi migration to Europe has caught the attention of some European scholars. For example, Melanie Knights (1996) explains the Bangladeshi migration to Italy. The background of her work stems from the rapidly changing geopolitical and economic context and migration patterns in Europe. Knights explores the structure and dynamics of the Bangladeshi migratory network based on the prolonged observation of the community in Rome. The first set of findings reveals emigration to be a nationwide phenomenon, affecting mainly educated migrants who adopt unauthorized strategies to enter Italy. The second set of findings reveals a vibrant covert economy functioning independently of the Italian labour market.

Russell King and Melanie Knights (1994) argue that rather than being a result of labour-demand pull forces from Italy, Bangladeshi emigration to Italy developed as a form of migratory opportunism provoked by the basic push forces. Both of these works also confirm the existence of the perception of overseas migration (as pointed by

Gardner, 1995) that contributes to the viability of migration alternative. After the Gulf War, labour migration to Southeast Asian countries increased dramatically especially to Malaysia. Anja Rudnick (1996) in her study on Bangladeshi workers in Malaysian textile industry sketches the conditions of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia in general. She reports that most of migrants would not have come to Malaysia if they had known about the actual payments and working conditions earlier. She concludes that negative image of immigrant workers prevalent in Malaysian society affects the well-being of the foreign workers as they are often dealt with distrust and contempt.

Abdul-Aziz (2001) elaborates on the factors that have led to the positioning of workers from Bangladesh to Malaysia. He concludes with a set of recommendations for the authorities in Bangladesh. Another work carried out by Ishida and Hassan (2000) on Bangladeshi labour migration to Malaysia show why temporary migrants intend to extend their stay in Malaysia. Their statistical analysis reveals the lower real remittances fall below the expected amounts, and the lower real wages are, compared with passage and mediation fees, the more will Bangladeshi workers wish to extend their stay. These facts imply that if future Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia have the correct information about income levels and living expenses in Malaysia, and hence mediation and passage fees become cheaper, the likelihood of their intending to extend their stays will be much lower. While these works on Malaysia adduce some insights into some of the aspects of Bangladeshi temporary migration, they do not reveal the motivational aspect of migration or link the host and home country to offer a broader understanding of the Bangladeshi migration.

The involuntary migration from Bangladesh also catches the attention of researchers. Habibul Haque Khondker (1995) addresses involuntary migration in detail. Khondker examines the relationship between the great November cyclone of 1970, and the subsequent the civil war that led to one of the largest (temporary) population displacement in history. He traces the history of involuntary migration in this region, resulting from political turmoil, communal violence, and civil war, and discussed the problem of the refugees as well. The civil war of 1971 displaced about 9 million people who took refugee in neighbouring India. This was perhaps the largest incidence of forced migration in human history resulting from a civil war. He paid special attention to the political underpinnings of the problem of refugees in the Indian subcontinent. His work provides a detailed politico-economic background to the crisis that led to this massive migration. Finally, he analyzed the impact of forced migration and population displacement on the political process of Bangladesh.

In the mid-1990s, we can see again some impact-studies on the Bangladeshi labour migration. For example, Islam (1995, 1988) examines the impact of international labour migration on Bangladesh. Islam identified some of the impacts of overseas migration at both the macro and micro levels. He reports that migration affects agrarian production relations, consumerism, employment pattern, infrastructure development, late marriage, infant mortality rate and pseudo-religious ceremonies in the Bangladeshi context. During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, a large number of migrant workers in Asia were affected. Ahmed (1998) addresses the impact of 1997's Asian financial crisis on Bangladeshi labour migration. She offers some valuable insights relevant to the macro policy issues. In the late 1990s, some scholars address the unauthorized migration from Bangladesh. For example, Mahmood (1998) explores the process through which

unauthorized migration begins and is perpetuated overtime. He explains the major stages and actors involved in the Bangladeshi unauthorized migration in the East and Southeast Asia.

Firoze (1997) and Shamim (1997) look into the trafficking in women and children from Bangladesh. Ahmed's (1999) research on undocumented migrant workers examines the extent to which an equitable apportionment of state responsibility is feasible in the context of undocumented labour migration. Siddiqui (2001) touches many of the aspects of female labour migration from Bangladesh. Thérèse Blanchet's (2002) recent work on the condition of Bangladeshi female migrants in India and Middle East has been a benchmark in the documentation of women labour migration and occurrences of trafficking. Returnees' narratives constituted the richest data of the research. In all, 496 case histories of migrant women were recorded. Each of the case studies revealed the story of exploitation and vulnerability of female migrants. The study concluded by recommending the ban on migrating unskilled women labour to the Middle East is lifted as it neither prevented women from migrating nor protected their rights. She suggests that labour migration be accepted as a right of women. With international migration, we can see some attempts to examine the internal migration as well (for example, Faraizi, 1993, Afser, 2000, Kuhn, 1999; 2003). These studies deal with rural-urban migration in details.

From the above discussion, it can be safely concluded that in spite of having three decades of labour migration experience, Bangladeshi labour migration has remained largely under-researched. We know little about the motivational aspect of labour migration. There has been hardly any attempt to incorporate migration motivation

with migration occurrence and thus offer an integrated explanation of labour migration by linking the both ends – sending and receiving countries. Although the family carries a huge weight in Bangladeshi society, the family perspective to migration research has been largely ignored. The paramount influence of cultural factors is often overlooked in favour of economic argument. There are some impact-studies. However, these studies have not adequately focused on the outcome of migration for the migrants and their families by using data from both ends. This thesis aims at filling in the dearth of Bangladeshi labour migration scholarships by examining some of the issues raised above.

## **Research Methodology**

Since this thesis links both ends of labour migration - host and home country - a diversified research method is undertaken. The thesis uses two types of data: secondary and primary. Secondary data comes from existing literature. The primary data is based on fieldwork conducted in Singapore and Bangladesh. Singapore fieldwork involves questionnaire surveys of 435 migrants while two ethnographic village studies were conducted in Bangladesh.

### **Fieldwork in Singapore**

First Phase: The Asian financial crisis<sup>16</sup> that hit Singapore in the end of 1998 affected unskilled foreign workers in Singapore severely. I started working on this thesis since the mid of 1998. As a result, I had the opportunity to talk to the migrants who have been affected by this regional crisis. I visited many of the Bangladeshi migrants' houses and inquired about their experiences. I particularly explored the causes and experience of their migration during this economic downturn. I interviewed 50 migrant workers who were affected by this financial crisis. These 50 victimized migrants were randomly selected from around 900 victimized migrants. I had to use non-probability sampling technique for some practical reasons: for example, I did not know the size of universe / population of migrants or victimized migrants. Although I had to use non-probability sampling technique, I attempted to make it more reliable by combining two major types of nonprobability sampling - quota and purposive samplings.

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<sup>16</sup> For details about the Asian financial crisis, see Chapter Seven

I met hundreds of victimized workers from different companies. I usually took interviews of five victimized workers (with minor variation) from each company through face-to-face interview method with a questionnaire having both structured and unstructured questions. I developed this questionnaire after conducting a pilot study on them. The majority of the victimized migrants had the same story to tell. They had almost same financial cost of migration, they encountered premature cancellation of work-permits and waited for deportation and all of them were unskilled construction workers. Migrants' responses were crosschecked by available documents, for example, pay slips, work permit, and passport and verified by the fellow company workers who were also encountered the similar fate. This was a cross-sectional study. They were interviewed near Bangladesh High Commission, Ministry of Manpower, Little India<sup>17</sup>, and the Geylang area in Singapore. The findings are presented in Chapter Seven.

Second Phase: In 2000, I interviewed 126 migrants to examine their socio-economic experiences in Singapore. After a pilot study, a questionnaire having both structured and unstructured questions was constructed. Questionnaire contained information on socio-economic characteristics of migrants, their means of meeting the financial cost of migration, accommodation, salary, expenditures, use of time, and access to migrant network. Each questionnaire took about half an hour to fill. Interviews were taken through face-to-face meeting and each questionnaire usually lasted for 25 to 30

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<sup>17</sup> Little India is a meeting place for Bangladeshi and Indian workers in Singapore. For details, see Chapter Six.

minutes. I used non-probability sampling - quota and purposive sampling<sup>18</sup> for the same reason, that is, lack of accurate figure on the universe. In addition, migrants' houses which are temporary in nature scatter all over in Singapore. As a result, a probability sampling was virtually impossible. This is a cross-sectional study. Interviews were carried out by visiting migrants' houses situated at major foreign workers residence areas, for example, Little India, Geylang road, Joo Chiat road, Jurong West, and Boon Lay. Detailed interviews of intermediaries, money traders and Bangladeshi shop-owners were also taken to understand the nature and interest of involvement of various agents in the migration process. Considering the nature of the information sought, I believe that a larger sample size would not have produced a significant difference from the present findings. The findings are presented in Chapter Six.

Third and Final Phase: In 2003 (January to March 2003), a brief questionnaire survey to examine the financial cost and benefit of migration was conducted among the departing migrants at Airport and staying migrants at residences in Singapore. During the financial crisis in 1997-1998, many companies had to close their business and this led to the deportation of many Bangladeshi migrants. I waited for quite a long time to conduct the final survey, as it would not have been methodologically viable to collect data immediately after the crisis and calculate the costs and benefits of migration from the migrants' point of view. This direct survey (participant interview) was conducted on 259

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<sup>18</sup> For example, in case of residences where 20 or 30 migrant workers were residing, I took interviews of 5 to 8 migrants because they were living together and employed by the same employer. Regarding the financial cost of migration and the recruitment procedures, use of non-probability sampling technique will have little bearing on the finding as the bulk of the migrants paid almost the same amount of cash for migration expenses and were subject to similar recruitment procedures discussed later in Chapter Five, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven.

migrants. This was again based on non-probability sampling and I used quota and purposive sampling simultaneously for data collection. Interviews of 150 migrants were conducted at their houses. The remaining 109 migrants were interviewed at Changi International Airport in Singapore before their departure. Returning migrants reach airport earlier than usual case. Generally, it is four or five hours before their scheduled time of departure. I interviewed them with a brief questionnaire and I hardly face unfavourable responses from them. In general, migrants came forward to divulge information on their own. The questionnaire, which was designed to use at the airport, consisted of few structured and unstructured questions. These findings are presented in Chapter Eight.

### **Fieldwork in Bangladesh**

Two Selected Village Studies: Since most of the migrant workers in Singapore are from rural areas of a few districts in Bangladesh, the second type of the fieldwork comprised the ethnographic study of two villages from such two Singapore migration-specific districts in Bangladesh. Labour migration involves individuals making decisions in specific cultural, economic, and social environments and therefore, is profoundly influenced not only by the constraints imposed by those environments but also by the perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and values of those individuals. Community-level information is hugely effective for analysis of the determinants and consequences of labour migration, particularly in low-income countries like Bangladesh as the social *effects* of behavioural decisions made by migrants or families can only be examined at the level of the community. Such a meso-level data (village level) may help to reduce the gulf between the micro-macro paradigms. One village study was designed to examine the

significance of the social and cultural context in the migration motivation and the other was to investigate the effects of migration on development. However, both village studies are complementary to each other.

Fieldwork in Singapore suggested that migration to Singapore was confined to several districts and Thanas in Bangladesh. These migration-specific districts are mainly Tangail, Munshiganj, Comilla, Dhaka, Gazipur, and Mymensingh. At the time of participant interviews in Singapore, I gathered some basic information from the respondents on a few districts. After visiting Bangladesh, I visited mainly two districts, Munshiganj and Tangail, for site selection. In accordance with my research interest, I had to find out two villages with high incidences of emigration to Singapore. For a variety of practical reasons, I decided to conduct research in the villages of Hoglekandi and Gurail, in Munshiganj and Tangail districts respectively. Each village had a total population of a few thousand and migration population of several hundred. In general, Hoglekandi and Gurail reflect all the characteristics of a typical village in Bangladesh. Being a Bangladeshi, I also used prior knowledge about the Bangladeshi village to select the village and to build the rapport with the villagers.

First ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at Hoglekandi in 1999. I visited this village regularly from Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, which is only around 40 km away. Second village study was conducted at Gurail from 2001 to 2002. Hoglekandi was mainly a flood-affected district and Gurail was mainly a nonflood-affected district. As reasons for migration from a flood-affected district to a nonflood-affected district may be different because of the economic situation created by water logging for all the year round, I decided to conduct fieldwork in a non-flood-affected village also with a view to

make a strong case for my thesis. I surveyed a questionnaire with structured and unstructured questions. Essentially, this is a study of migration at the level of individuals and families, placed into a broader structural context. Therefore, the research placed most of the emphasis on the interviews of individual migrants, female members (especially wives of returnees), and heads of families, as it seemed that these methods would provide insights into the complexities of the migration process. The detail and richness of data obtained through such an approach provide analytical insights into the migration motivation, social process of migration and effects of migration. The findings are presented in Chapter Four, Chapter Five, Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine.

### **The Use of Detailed Individual Interviews**

The detailed interviews of few migrants are presented almost in every chapter. These interviews are presented as exactly as possible in the words of the participants. I used both real names and fictitious names in the detailed interviews. This is because, at the time of village study, some respondents did not want to reveal their identity; they were sometimes afraid of and in some cases, they requested me not to use their real names. I had the opportunity to talk with the migrants almost every day in Singapore. Many of the migrants with whom I developed friendship used to visit me regularly. Intensive informal interviews were conducted almost everyday. They gave detailed accounts of how and why they migrated, how they arranged the financial cost of migration, what type of work they did, how many hours they worked, how much they earned, how they spent their leisure and so on. Sometimes I participated in their leisure activities as well. This participation provided many valuable insights and opportunities to

observe them. The survey and detailed interviews of individuals stimulated and complemented each other throughout the thesis.

### **Field Observation**

To further understanding of the dynamics of village life and social life of migrants in Singapore, I supplemented interviews with field observation techniques. I had numerous opportunities to interact with my respondents in Bangladesh and Singapore. Initially when I conducted the interviews some of the respondents were cautious and reticent. However, on later occasion some of the respondents voluntarily came forward to divulge information. In the case of field research in Singapore, I was used to visiting the migrants' houses regularly. Without being an objective observer (a detached 'outsider'), I strived to be 'insider' in the research relationship involving an 'understanding beyond' that springs from my awareness of social and cultural factors. This goes beyond establishing a simple rapport and documenting what the respondents said.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

This introductory chapter offers the background of the thesis. The following account of the thesis is divided into nine chapters: one chapter of theoretical framework, one chapter of the introduction of migration history and policies of the two countries- Bangladesh and Singapore, six chapters of research findings and one concluding chapter.

Chapter Two points out the inadequacies of the existing theories and develops an alternative integrative theory to explain rationality, social processes and effects of migration.

Chapter Three describes the patterns of Bangladeshi labour migration and government policy towards emigration. A historical sketch of Singapore immigration policy has been presented to show the changes in policies over time and how these changes have facilitated Singapore to grow as a regional economic power. This chapter concludes with the prediction that Bangladesh will rely, in the near future, on the overseas employment program as a mechanism for coping with its unemployment and balance of payment problems and Singapore will need foreign human resources in the years to come to fulfill the structural demands of its economy.

Chapter Four explains the socio-cultural factors in the motivation for migration. Empirical data comes from ethnographic study of Gurail village and supplemented by migrant workers' survey in Singapore.

Chapter Five deals with the social organization of migration and argues that Bangladeshi migration to Singapore is mainly a network migration. Empirical data comes from the Gurail findings and migrant workers' survey in Singapore.

Chapter Six examines the circumstances in which migrants work and live in Singapore.

Chapter Seven documents the plight of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore during the 1997's Asian financial crisis and explains the reasons for their migration during the crisis. This chapter examines whether the migration decision-making were made under complete information in a rational cost-benefit fashion as the neoclassical economic theorists suggest.

Chapter Eight examines the financial cost and benefit of labour migration. This chapter substantiates the proposition that labour migration is economically disadvantageous to the bulk of the migrants and their families.

Chapter Nine looks into the impact of labour migration on a village. Empirical data comes from the village study in Hoglekandi. This chapter introduces an improved model to the impact-analysis in the Asian context.

Chapter Ten discusses the theoretical and empirical contributions of the research. Here, I assess the achievements of my research objectives and evaluate the extent to which it has met the challenges. I discuss my major findings and attempt to relate them to the wider migration debate. Finally, I identify areas for further research.

## **The Scope and Limitations of the Thesis**

This thesis deals with temporary labor migration. The thesis explores individual migrants rather than migrant families in Singapore. Singapore laws do not allow migrant

workers to bring their families, who are left behind in Bangladesh. The study ignores unusual individual cases, for example, adventures of young people, migration decision of divorcee or politically motivated migration, to avoid the confusion. Since most of the migrants are of rural background, data are collected from the villages in Bangladesh. Migrant families who live at the urban areas are not covered in the fieldwork. This thesis deals with only legal migrant workers who are R-pass holders<sup>19</sup>. Thus, it excludes a handful of professionals or illegal migrants. While this thesis makes important contribution, several limitations remain. For example, I could not explore the detailed health care facilities of the migrants in Singapore. Migrant's social life is not fully explored. Fieldwork in Bangladesh did not include the impact of migration on the women left behind. These areas need careful investigation.

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description of the R passes, see Chapter Three.