

## CHAPTER FOUR

# SOCIAL FACTORS AND MIGRATION: A VILLAGE STUDY

### Introduction

This chapter deals with factors affecting migration motivation. Bangladeshi labor migration to Singapore is predominantly a rural phenomenon<sup>1</sup>. In this chapter, I therefore, look into a migration-prone village in Bangladesh to explore the families' explanations for migration motivation. This ethnographic village study attempts to explain social and cultural aspects of rural Bangladesh under which the actual migration decision is made. The thesis identifies several socio-cultural forces in the study village and argues that they are crucial to interpret the families' motivation for migration. At the outset, I must make clear that the following discussion of the international labor migration is based on the situations in which the migrant is part of an organic community. Such a community context usually implies that the individuals within it have some awareness of mutual bonds as well as the obligation for reciprocity toward each other.

---

<sup>1</sup> Migrant worker surveys in Singapore reveal that 84.13 percent of migrants were of rural origin while the remaining 15.87 percent were of city origin (Thana city, district city, or divisional city). See Table 6.1 in Chapter Six,

## **The Study Village: Gurail**

Out-migration from Bangladesh to Singapore is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Hence, the fieldwork undertaken for this research consists of an ethnographic village study in Bangladesh. Such mid-level data collected at the community level will help bridge the micro and macro paradigms of migration, and offer better insights into why individuals choose to migrate. In accordance with my research interests, I located my fieldwork in a village with high incidence of emigration to Singapore. Tangail is one of the major Singapore migration-sending districts in Bangladesh. I had extensive discussions with the migrant workers from Tangail during my fieldwork in Singapore, and made friends with many of the migrants from this district. As a result, I gradually developed an interest in conducting fieldwork in a village from Tangail district. Tangail is around 70 km away from Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. I went to Bangladesh for fieldwork in 2001, I met many of the migrants' relatives when I visited various villages in Tangail.

As a Bangladeshi, I was easily able to interact with the villagers. After visiting several villages and talking to the people from different sections of the society, I finally decided to do research in the village of Gurail. Several hundred males have migrated to Singapore from here, and it reflects the general characteristics of a typical village in Bangladesh. Gurail is divided into six *Paras* (neighborhoods), including *Mirda para*, *Uttar para*, *Moddho para*, *Noya para*, *Paschim para*, and *Purbo para*. Each *para* has about 70 to 100 families. Singapore migration was so widespread in this village that almost every family had a member who had spent time there. Along with participatory ethnography, a participatory questionnaire survey was also carried out in one of the

*paras* to identify the general socio-economic characteristics of migrant and nonmigrant families. The questionnaire survey had both structured and unstructured questions and was administered to 50 migrant families and 5 nonmigrant families. People at Gurail are basically living in poverty. There are two crop seasons in a year. The main crops the villagers cultivate are paddy, potato, master oilseeds, and other seasonal vegetables.

### **Social Organization**

To explain the context under which decisions to migrate are made I briefly discuss Gurail's different types of social groupings. This is important because the socio-cultural forces - particularly those that affect or are affected by international labor migration - act through these social groupings. Gurail's major social groups include the family (*Paribar*), *gusthi* (lineage), and *samaj* (community). These parallel the physical divisions of *Ghar* (home), *Bari* (collection of families), and *para* (hamlet or locality) (Bertocci, 1972, Aziz, 1979, Rozario 1992, and Wood, 1994; Jensen, 1987). A brief description of different levels of social, spatial, and economic organization is given in Table 4.1.

The most basic grouping is the family. A family is often referred to as *Ghar* (home) in rural Bangladesh. The family can be defined as a group that shares property and eats together from the same hearth (Rozario, 1992). The family is the basic structural unit between the individual, his/her *Bari*, *gusthi* (lineage) and kinship networks, and the wider *samaj* (community) (Wood, 1994). Most families in Gurail are part of larger *Baris* and lineages. In my sample, 30 per cent of migrants were from nuclear families and the

remaining 70 percent from extended families. The heads of families (*Ghar Murubbi*) exercise power and authority in family affairs. Family members traditionally follow decisions taken by the head of the family. Family heads not only decide about family affairs, but also pay for the expenses needed to materialize various decisions including migration one, which eventually put them at the center of the decision-making bodies.

The second important social group is the *Bari*, which usually stands for a group of families sharing the same courtyard. Since inheritance is patrilineal, a male member heads a *Bari* and the head of the *Bari* is usually the eldest person. The role of the family head is to show loyalty to the head of the *Bari*. Such loyalty from members is essential if the *Bari* is to enjoy respect in larger social groups such as the *para* or *samaj*. Individuals are known to the outside world as members of particular *Bari* or lineage. The names of some *Baris* at Gurail are *Mia Bari*, *Molla Bari*, *Mirdda Bari*, *Munshi Bari*, *Sikder Bari*, and *Haolader Bari*. Usually, the name of the lineage is the name of the *Bari*. However, sometimes members of the *Bari* may substitute new names for the lineage-based names based on members' outstanding achievements. For example, some of the *Baris* in this village and neighboring villages are known as the Singapore *Bari*, Malaysia *Bari* and Saudi *Bari*. This means that someone from those *Baris* must have migrated to Singapore, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. Thus, international migration functions as a source of new identity for oneself and one's family and *Bari*.

In general, *Baris* are components of a larger group such as the *Gusthi* or *Para*. In Bangladesh, different terms are used for 'lineage', for example, *Bangsho* or *Gusthi*, depending on the region. In Gurail, people use both the terms *Gusti* and *Bangsho*, referring to the group of kin who trace their descent from one male ancestor. *Para* is a

spatial grouping that means neighborhood. The *Para* functions as a social basis for support and for sharing lands and common resources. The notion of *Kartoba* (duty) is important in the local ideology of kinship and neighborhood. This means that where possible, support and economic help is given to *Gusti* and *Para* members if they are in need. Thus, within the *Gusthi* and *Para* a certain degree of reciprocity is common and prospective migrants may reap the benefits when they are in need.

### **Socio-Economic Profiles of Returnees**

Table 4.2 presents the socio-economic characteristics of migrant families. The migrant families were predominantly engaged in self-employment. By ‘self-employment’, I mean people who are engaged in farming, informal economic activities and traditional lineage occupations of their own. Self-employed families will not sell their labor for money, as it is not prestigious to sell one’s own labor in the local labor market<sup>2</sup>. By ‘wage-employment’, I mean people who sell their labor for money. 64 percent of migrant families were found to be engaged in self-employment while 4 percent were engaged in wage-employment. Prior to migrating, 14 percent of families had no cultivable land<sup>3</sup> and 20 percent had 151-400 decimal land. A family of 6 to 8 members needs 400-500 decimal arable land for subsistence living in this area<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it

---

<sup>2</sup> I explain further under “work and migration.”

<sup>3</sup> National figures suggests that in rural Bangladesh, 9 percent of rural families are landless and 50 percent have less than 99 decimal land on average (Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The fertility of the land depends on the geographical location. Villagers in Gurail reported that a family of six to eight members will need between 400 and 500 decimal land for subsistence living.

is safe to assume that all the migrant families were short of the amount of land needed for subsistence living. This finding goes against the conventional argument that international migrants are usually from better-off sections of the society.

Around three quarters of returnees experienced financial loss from their migration (Table 4.3). I have identified three major reasons for this negative outcome: the high cost of migration, the sources of raising funds needed for migration<sup>5</sup>, and premature deportation<sup>6</sup>. Among the five nonmigrant families interviewed, the first family had only six daughters. The head of the family was unhappy about having so many daughters as he could not send them to Singapore for employment<sup>7</sup>. The second family intended to send members to Singapore soon. The third and fourth families were too poor to arrange the financial cost of migration. However, the fourth family found the solution for paying the cost of migration by marrying off the elder son for a higher dowry. The last family had one son after around eleven years of marriage. This son was only seventeen year old. This family did not want to send their long-awaited child overseas for emotional reasons.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, families sell off their cultivable land, livestock, and gold ornaments. Thus, they risk their livelihood. They borrow cash from traditional moneylenders with high interest rates because of the absence of formal institutional support for meeting their migration expenses. Interest rates range between 100 to 150 per cent per annum. Migrants who borrow the whole cost of migration from moneylenders usually encounter great difficulty in repaying the debt after working in Singapore for just 2 years.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes employers in Singapore have no project on which to employ the foreign workers. In such circumstance, they usually cannot pay the levy for each foreign worker which was SG\$ 470 for unskilled workers and SG\$ 30 for semiskilled workers in the late 1990s. Failure to pay the levy for a few consecutive months lead to the cancellation of work permits and immediate deportation of foreign workers.

<sup>7</sup> Female labor migration was banned in Bangladesh in 1998. Recently, this ban was rescinded.

## **Social Factors in Migration: Insights from Gurail**

In the preceding discussion, I have described Gurail's different types of social groupings to show the context in which the decision to migrate is made. Second, I have shown that migration is not confined to the wealthier groups, notwithstanding its high financial costs.<sup>8</sup> Finally, international migration is economically disadvantageous to the bulk of migrants and their families<sup>9</sup>. In the subsequent discussion, I first explain the social construction and complexities of social status in Gurail to provide an overview of the status hierarchy and its importance in Gurailians' lives. Following this, I review some socio-cultural factors that motivate out-migration from Gurail.

---

<sup>8</sup> I have shown this through land-possession data which indicates that all migrants fell short of the landowning needed for a minimum subsistence level.

<sup>9</sup> For example, 90 per cent of returnees' families consider that migration has been economically disadvantageous for their families; see Table 4.2.

## **The Social Construction and Complexities of Status in Gurail**

Social status designates a “position in the general institutional system, recognized and supported by the entire society, and rooted in the folkways and mores” (Homans 1961). The social status of the individual, family, and *Bari* is of tremendous importance in rural Bangladesh, as the rural people consider social position in day-to-day social interactions. Villagers are very status-minded because fundamental values of honor (*sanman*) and shame (*lazza*) can make a difference in their life chances. Competition among individuals, families and *Baris* for higher social status occurs across the social divisions and within a framework of commonly shared values where honor and shame occupy the central position. Rather than being dominated solely by economic standing or hereditary rank, there are several analytically distinct measures of status, which people use according to different contexts. Landownership, birth, education, and the presence of wealthy and powerful kin are all interrelated to influence the life chances an individual can achieve and the strategies he can manipulate.

Social status in Gurail goes beyond class in the Marxist sense. The Marxist usage of ‘class’ refers to the relationship to the means of production, which involves those who own and control the means of production and those who do not. In Gurail, although many villagers are landless and earn their living by working outside the family, the situation of Gurail is a long way from developing into a pure market situation where the buying and selling of labor as a commodity can take place (Rozario, 1992). The poorer families depend upon their richer relatives for support; individuals from different economic classes never perceive themselves as such. This is already well documented in Bangladesh, where observers have pointed out that patronage and vertical lineage



solidarity prevent class consciousness from developing (see for example Rozario, 1992:50; Jansen, 1987:300; Gardner, 1995, Islam, 1974; Wood, 1994). For all these reasons, social status in Gurail is more prominent than social class.

In general, social actors may claim status as individuals and as members of families, lineages, communities, and other collectivities. Therefore, one's status may vary depending on personal accomplishment, family reputation, connections, resources, and the status groups to which one claims membership. Individuals' conformity to norms and their adherence to group goals or values constitute the most important bases of how others evaluate their social status. Status is associated with families or lineages /*Bari*, and the incompatible behavior of any member of the family or lineage endangers the status of whole family, *Bari* and lineage. As a result, the family and *Bari* have privileges to put pressure on members to comply with the traditions and practices of the *Bari* or lineage. Disobedience to this tradition and practice leads to shame for the individual, his family, and his *Bari*. Regular meetings between the heads of the families and the head of the *Bari* often end with renewing the commitment to fulfilling social responsibilities that will gain the *Bari* prestige.

Broadly, I identified three sets of social classifications in Gurail. In everyday life, divisions by which the villagers identify themselves refer to distinctions based on blood. Villagers differentiate between *uccho gusthi* (high lineage) and *nicho gusthi* (low lineage). One main characteristic of *uccho gusthi* is that people of *uccho gusthi* do not work in other people's houses or on their land. However, people of *nicho gusthi* are less concerned with these restrictions. Compared to this blood-based social classification, two other kinds of social divisions are less rigid. They are *baralok* (rich) and *chhotolok*

(poor) and *bhalomanush* (literally 'good people') and *chhotomanush* (literally, 'small people') (found also in other regions by Thorp, 1978:40; Rozario, 1992:61; Wood, 1994 and Gardner 1995). The term '*baralok*' is used to refer to both persons of wealth and person of high status, while '*chhotolok*' is used for person of little wealth and no status.

Although social mobility is limited in Gurail, however, it is not impossible to achieve. The dynamism exists because the individual's place in society is not rigidly determined at birth, as is the case among the Hindus (Dumont, 1980). Individuals from both *uccho gusthi* or *bhalamanush* and *nicho gusthi* or *chhotomanush* are joining in overseas employment, and people have a higher esteem for those who have been employed overseas regardless of the nature of work one does there. In recent years, migration is viewed increasingly as leverage for making status claims. With the changes in the villagers' attitude towards status, international migration has emerged as a solution to the status trap, particularly among families who would have otherwise remained invisible in the social standing. Now these individuals can find a way to consolidate their status position through migration. However, these changes do not mean that hereditary status is of less importance than before. I argue that Gurail has become more open to the outside world, and villagers are now more than ever concerned with achieved status rather than ascribed status.

Villagers' attitude towards international migration reflects the fact that, in some cases, migration to Singapore has overwhelmingly nullified the other traditional means of claiming status. For example, even individuals who possess a high educational background or who hold land and businesses of their own have queued up for overseas

employment<sup>10</sup>. Migration is viewed as a viable option open to all, irrespective of class and traditional status boundaries. Usually, social standing in Gurail is explained in terms of access to out-migration destinations, and this association functions as a means of building social relations. This has gone so far that in some cases, villagers address a *Bari* by a new name that usually stems from the destination to which individuals have migrated, rather than the traditionally-known name based on lineage<sup>11</sup>. All these changes demonstrate that migration to Singapore has become a way of life for the people of Gurail.

---

<sup>10</sup> I found several cases where siblings of local political and economic elites have Singapore migration experience. Other returnees who are usually from the lowest social ladder see them as belonging to their own category.

<sup>11</sup> Malaysian *Bari* at the *Uttar para* is the best example in this case. Previously this *Bari* received little attention from the outside villagers. One of the members of this *Bari* went to Malaysia and he later assisted several of his cousins to migrate there. This has made this *Bari* unique in the village and gradually villagers have started referring to this *Bari* as a Malaysian *Bari*.

## ***Bidesh* and *Desh*: Geographical Imaginations and Social Status**

The terms ‘*Bidesh*’ (foreign country) and *Desh* (home country) in relation to international migration was first used and elaborated by Katy Gardner (1995) in her classical work “Global Migrants, Local Lives”. In her ethnographic village study in Sylhet district, Bangladesh, a large number of people migrated to London. These migrant families became known as *Londoni* families. Gardner finds that villagers’ desires center on the distant localities of foreign countries. For those who have never left the home country, it is only overseas that economic power and the means to material betterment are supposed to occur. As Gardner (1995) states, “at one level, images of home and abroad refer to inequality between nations, at another, to local social organization, for the locality of individuals ascribes their status and economic position”. She reports that the economic dominance of families with migrant members has meant that *bidesh* is associated with success and power, which the *desh* is unable to provide.

### **The Case of Kauser Sikder**

“Everyone in this area (village) talks about Singapore migration. My cousins and friends went to Singapore long before. I had no brothers to talk with at my *Bari*. When my cousins visited, they talked about their fantastic experiences in Singapore. My cousins worked for long time in Singapore. Three of my cousins have ‘Singapuri televisions<sup>12</sup>’ and one of them also has

---

<sup>12</sup> When Kauser talked about “Singapuri television and refrigerator or music system’ he actually meant that it was not brought from home markets. It is Singapore-made. Although Singapore

a ‘Singapuri refrigerator’ and ‘music system’. My cousins were also good students like me. But, they did not study much. It was shame not to migrate. I told my father about Singapore migration, but he did not support my idea. He wanted me to carry out my education. I was more comfortable with my mother, so I insisted to my mother. My mother was in favor of my decision.

She told my cousins in Singapore to send me a work-visa. All my cousins respect my mother very much. My cousins sent my visa after few months. My mother spent around 220,000 Taka for my migration. We sold land and borrowed cash from my maternal uncle. I worked in Singapore for two years. I married off my two sisters by spending around Taka 100,000 for each. Both of my brothers-in-law were from different districts and good socio-economic backgrounds. They did not ask for any dowry. In place of a dowry, they demanded my help for their migration to Singapore, as they had no relatives in Singapore.

Whatever I earned in Singapore, I spent it on my family. Now, I have no savings. We have lost a good piece of land. However, I am happy to think that I have married off my two sisters. I am proud of performing my duty as

---

does not make all these honor goods and again those honor goods are available at home country as well. However, buying from local market and from Singapore is not the same thing. Along with better quality of Singapore’s products (although it is not made in Singapore) that villagers often argued for, these Singapore products (as villagers think) reflect families’ access to foreign labor market. To say another way, these goods reflect that members of the family are working in a foreign country like Singapore. Working in Singapore rather than in home country is a matter of success and pride to them (explained in the section Work and Migration in this Chapter). When an out-side person (little known about inside of family) visits a migrant family, the first impression about the family’s social position comes from this type of foreign goods they do have. Thus, these consumer goods carry different meanings to the villagers.

an ideal brother. My cousins could not do this for their sisters. Everyone in my *Bari* likes me. I do not want to work in Bangladesh now. I told my cousins in Singapore to send me a visa soon.”

To the people of Sylhet, *bidesh* usually implies London, while the more general Bengali term '*bidesh*' means any 'foreign country'. The social construction of *bidesh* varies from place to place, according to whichever major migration destination country is most prevalent. If the bulk of the people from a particular place migrate to a particular country, by *bidesh* people of that region usually mean that particular destination country. The majority of people from Tangail have migrated to Singapore. As a result, for them *bidesh* means Singapore, by and large. The Gurailians see migration to Singapore as participation in a *rite de passage*- a term originally used by Victor Turner (1967). The meaning of migration is constructed in such a manner that upholds the 'culture of honor'. This notion of 'culture of honor' is further supported by local proverbs such as 'without migration experience a man is not a complete man', or 'no risk no gain'; all these have a huge influence on the decision to migrate, especially among younger males. Individuals feel obligated to participate in the migration process, as the observance of village norms and values results in increased recognition and respect for the individuals who have migrated and for their families and *Baris*. One's refusal to migrate is considered backward and sluggish.

---

### The Case of Aziz Mirdda

Aziz Mirdda was a Singapore returnee. His family once owned a modest amount of land. This land plus that of his brother was sold to pay of his passage to Singapore. He was in Singapore with a two-year work permit. He had to come back home prematurely after being victimized in a fraud case. Upon return, he found himself in deep debt.

Aware of such tales, families in Gurail are still prepared to put down credit for similar deals. Correspondingly, many are cheated. Everything is gambled for what is perceived as a golden opportunity, but which rarely proves to be the case. Families are desperate to put credit on a migration venture. In the desperation to migrate, men are willing to sell their small patches of land or to take loans from traditional moneylenders with often around 100 percent interest rates<sup>13</sup>, which they can hardly repay. Some migrants are deported before they begin to earn enough to make it all worthwhile. Some others are cheated by unscrupulous brokers who give them false papers and then disappear. Some fall prey to cheats not once but several times, and end up landless. This attitude, which puts migration above everything else and prompts many families to risk their livelihood in attempting to gain access to foreign land, involves a belief that a golden deer<sup>14</sup> lives in the foreign land, and access to that land can change the wheel of fortune overnight.

---

<sup>13</sup> Discussed in Chapter Nine also. See Table 9.2 in Chapter Nine

<sup>14</sup> Golden deer, which usually means enormous success, is a commonly used metaphor in Bangladesh. In general, people use this metaphor in relation to international migration.

Villagers believe in the immense power of *bidesh*. Villagers think that even unsuccessful migration has a potentiality of transforming an individual's destiny. The migration experience is seen as capital that can be used in different ways to gain access to social status, political power or economic gain. Some returnees are engaged in channeling prospective migrants to Singapore. Relations between returnees and prospective migrant and non-migrant families are based on a generalized reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972: 255) in which one does not give in order to receive, and the return of the gift is not constrained by time, quality, or quantity. Non-migrant families visit returnees in search of information and financial assistance. Members of families in which individuals have recently migrated visit returnees to show their gratitude and to become informed of how their family members are in Singapore. Thus, returnees build up new social relations based on their migration capital. In doing so, heredity or land-based status distinctions hardly come into play, as they are replaced with norms such as reciprocity and mutual obligation in this new situation.

### **Relative Status and Perpetuation of Migration**

We have seen in the interview of Kauser Sikder that he referred to his *Bari*, to the migration experiences of his cousins and friends, and to prestigious goods such as a 'Singapuri television' and 'refrigerator'. We can see that he was proud of marrying off his two sisters by spending a good amount of cash, measured by the standards of rural Bangladesh. He mentioned his success in relation to his cousins, who could not perform



their brotherly responsibility for their sisters<sup>15</sup>. Thus, we can see that Kauser Sikder directly and indirectly compared himself with other migrants of his *Bari*. His expressions make clear that before migrating he perceived himself as belonging to a lower social status associated with not migrating to Singapore. Although the actual migration decision usually stems from many other considerations such as incurred costs, contacts in the destination country, and the perceptions of migration or attitudes toward overseas work, relative status becomes a differentiating factor in migration decision-making when migration affects the entire social group such as the *Bari*, as migration networks mature<sup>16</sup>.

In general, a family's action is affected by the extent of the individual's dissatisfaction with his position in the groups such as the *Bari* or *para*, and his groups' position in even large groups (for example inter-*Bari*, inter-*para*). Relative status inequality induces migration in a group situation like the *Bari* when the families in different groups (*Bari*, *para*, lineage, inter-*bari*, or inter-*para*) fall into two subgroups: those who have access to overseas work and those who lack it. The latter strongly feel deprived of status, relative to the former. Consequently, the motivation for the latter is to gain status through migration. This is the case because international migration is itself a

---

<sup>15</sup> Performing responsibility brings honor and prestige and if a brother does not perform his responsibility, it is shame for him.

<sup>16</sup> Migrant networks, according to Massey et al. (1993), are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. As migration continues, these well-known social connections acquire new meanings and functions. I argue that migration is a status symbol and when a migrant helps the nonmigrant in the migration process, he receives social honor from the community for performing his duties to the home, his *Bari* and his community. If a migrant does not perform this basic responsibility toward his home, *Bari*, and his community, it is 'shame' mainly for him and his family.

status symbol, and undergoing the migration experience makes a difference in one's status position. As families in Gurail have limited opportunity to change their social standing through local contacts or resources, international migration appears promising to them. Thus, relative status argument is built first on the notion that people are engaged in interpersonal status comparisons which are internalized, thus generating the sense of relative status. Second, viewing migration as an act of choice, the premise builds on the notion that relative status influences locational decisions at the level of the *Bari*, lineage, *para*, inter-*Bari*, inter-lineage or inter-*para* level.

For instance, in *Noya Sikder Bari* (see Table 4.4), there are seven families. There is no case of 'never migrated'<sup>17</sup> in this *Bari*. If we look at the migration patterns, we can see that the migration opportunity came first to Family 1, then to Family 2 and gradually to other families. Other families took later advantage of the opportunity to migrate. In-depth interviews reveal that after the migration by members of Family -1, other families felt increasing pressure to send their members overseas (as we have seen in the case of Kauser Sikder). The pressure mounted when Family 1 and Family 3 gained noticeable prestige goods such as refrigerators, color televisions and gold ornaments for their female members. All these new acquisitions shook up long-held status positions in this *Bari*. And, members from other nonmigrant families gradually responded to this rising status gap, actual or perceived, by migrating to wherever possible. Villagers frequently said me that it is better to migrate somewhere than not to migrate anywhere. The range of migration destinations found in the *Noya Sikder Bari* probably stem from this kind of rationale.

---

<sup>17</sup> By 'never migrants, the thesis means those individuals who are at migration age but will not migrate.

Relative status has enormous implications because it helps makes sense of decisions about migration and migration destinations. For example, it offers a sociological explanation for one of the most widely observed migration phenomenon—the tendency for migration to become self-perpetuating. The received sociological explanation is that once migration from a given sending community begins, there are good reasons for it to continue because of the emergence of migrant networks that link the destination end with the sending end. Until now, sociologists have attributed the self-sustaining nature of migrant flows and their persistence after economic incentives disappeared to the emergence of social networks, a tool to explain migration motivation through destination end features. The popular argument is that “with the presence at the receiving end of friends and relatives- fellow villagers constituting an earlier vintage of migrants – who can provide destination-specific information, hedge against the initial high risks associated with attempts to enter a new labor market and / or secure continuous employment in it” (Stark, 1991).

Economic explanations account for the sending end of the self-perpetuating migration phenomenon. These explanations focus on the potential contributions that migration may make to the absolute income of the individual or the family. An improved version of this economic explanation given by Stark (1984,1991) argues that family members undertake migration not necessarily to increase the family’s absolute income, but rather to improve the family’s position (in terms of relative deprivation) with respect to a specific reference group (Stark, 1991). The basic premises of relative deprivation<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The original conceptualization of the relative deprivation theory appears in the famous three-volume research monograph *the American Soldier: Adjustment during Army Life* (Stouffer et al. 1949). The theory has been applied to several fields in order to model social behavior (see Crosby,

are “(a) that, given a person’s own (current) income, his satisfaction or deprivation is some function of income statistics other than this income (for example, a statistic based on the incomes of some (not necessarily all) other persons) and (b) that migration is undertaken in order to improve a person’s position in terms of the latter statistic” (Stark, 1991: 135).

Thus, in the received theory the tendency toward perpetuation is explained by a receiving-end factor – the paucity or possession of crucial destination-specific capital (Da Vanzo and Morrison, 1981) or a sending-end factor – relative deprivation (Stark, 1991). The alternative suggested is that such perpetuation stems from the relative status factor at the sending-end. “The anomaly of persistent migrant flows from some communities and not from others in the same region, despite similar economic conditions’ (Portes, 1983) creates the vacuum that the present economic explanation cannot convincingly explain. A sociological explanation is also lacking for this phenomenon. The relative status argument comes to fill in this dearth of explanation because it (a) does not consider such a process as an ‘anomaly’ and (b) suggests an additional differentiating factor, relative status in the community of origin, contributing to the sociological understanding of the tendency for migration to self-perpetuate. Relative status is a contributing factor in migration that may operate independently of purely economic considerations in the traditional society.

---

1979). The theory was further improved by Runciman (1966), Yitzhaki (1979, 1982) and Stark (1984). Later Stark (1991) has elaborated and modified the theory to use in the areas of rural-urban and international migration.

## Work and Migration

Individuals' employment choices are influenced not just by structural and human capital factors, but also by cultural expectations and family and community pressures. Therefore, an understanding of the perceptions of community values and the general context in which an individual makes decisions about work is relevant and important. Work connotes special meaning to individuals, which derives from village-based norms, traditions, perceptions, expectations and so on. Some types of work bring prestige to individuals, their families and lineages, while others bring disgrace (Table 4.5). Selected variables determine what types of work are worth pursuing for whom. Among these variables, family, lineage, education, and prior work specialisations are noteworthy. Villagers generally define work as '*bhalo kaz*' (good work) and '*mandha kaz*' (bad work), terms related to the notions of 'honor' and 'shame', respectively. This dichotomy of work - '*bhalo kaz*' and '*mandha kaz*' is common in rural Bangladesh. By '*bhalo kaz*', villagers generally mean those types of work that are compatible with social norms, traditions and customs, and consistent with the family or *Bari* prestige. Contrarily, by '*mandha kaz*' they mean those types of work that are beneath one's status. Doing the family or lineage-compatible work means good work that brings social prestige, while pursuing family or lineage-incompatible work leads to shame for the family and *Bari*.

The notion of work among Gurailians is complex one. Several decades ago, villagers lived in a social world where the wealthiest landowners appeared not to work at all. They hired others to perform needed agricultural and domestic tasks. As a result, the people I met in Gurail, explained 'working' as a sign of low status. Working for wages signified the lowest status. Due to inheritance law, many offspring of formerly landed-

class family have lost considerable amounts of land, and many of them now need to engage in some kind of work to earn more money for a respectable living. In such a case, they may have to choose work that is compatible with their family or lineage prestige to claim or retain their former status. For a farmer, agricultural work may be honorable but not rickshaw-pulling, if the latter occupation was not also pursued by other members of his family. Again, rickshaw pulling is not considered to be bad work if it is done by individuals whose family members have also engaged in this livelihood. Thus, the complex notion of work exerts a paramount influence on individuals' occupational pursuits.

Although doing certain types of work will not change one's hereditary status, it remains inappropriate for certain types of people to do particular work. Work can, therefore, help to create and destroy the reputation of a family. The most important criterion, however, is that only *chhotomanush* would ever work for another descent group. If forced by economic necessity, *bhalomanush* would also do it, but this would cause deep shame. 'If people from our lineage saw us working in another lineage's Bari or in a public place, a poor *bhalomanush* told me, 'they would be furious with us, and we would feel ashamed'. However, it does not mean that all members of a lineage would have sufficient wealth to avoid working for others. If one family from one *Bari* is poor, then members from that family usually work within the same *Bari* or lineage to hide their poverty and retain prestige within larger social groupings.

Over time, the meaning of work has changed dramatically for the younger generation. For example, Razzak Mirdda is 23. His father is a sharecropper with few years of schooling. He told me, "My father may work in the agricultural field; I will not

engage in that type of work. I do not even want to work in the *desh*". Thus, to the young generation, work is no longer tied to conventional notions such as that the son of a farmer should become a farmer or the son of a weaver should become a weaver<sup>19</sup>. The dissatisfaction of young generation with traditional occupational pursuits leads to a decrease in the rural working population. Again, the notion of work changes with the acquisition of a new status. For instance, after returning from working abroad, villagers expect that returnees will not engage in *mandho kaz* and even to some extent, in any paid work at the community level. If a returnee seeks to a place in the local or national labor market, it brings shame upon himself and his family to some extent. Table 4.2 provides data on occupation before and after migration. After migration, a large number of migrants were unemployed. The reason behind this unemployment was largely due to factors associated with status. Thus, the notion of work influences individuals' occupational alternatives not only before, but also after migration.

## Education and Migration

### The Case of Salim *Mirdda*

Salim Mirdda was 18. He completed ten years of schooling in 2000. He was a good student. After the sudden death of his father, he had to start working in order for his family to survive. A road, locally called "*Bisha Road*", was

---

<sup>19</sup> In my sample, there were few weaver and potter families. They were Hindus. In Hindu caste system, there is a tradition of following occupations of the descents. I have found that they are

under construction at one end of this village. He joined in this road construction work. After working for first few days, he observed that many of his co-workers were criticizing him for doing such menial work in a public place. This was going on despite the fact that all his co-workers were from low-prestige Bari or lineages, and some of them even were from his own Bari. However, the issue that deemed him unfit for this work is that he had certified schooling, which the others did not have. He was in an awkward situation. He found this work shameful for himself and his family. He was especially concerned about his sisters who were to be married off soon. In consideration of these issues, he left construction work and contacted relatives in Singapore to begin the process of obtaining a work visa. When I met him, he was still unemployed and waiting for a job contract to come through from Singapore.

In the migration literature, two perspectives conventionally explain the relationship between education and migration (see for details Stark 1991; Barnum and Sabot, 1976; Caldwell 1969). The first one attributes the motivation to migrate to education. Here, the argument is that the better-educated youngsters who acquire non-rural human capital, and who possess more human capital than their rural counterparts, are in doing so, compelled to migrate. The second relates migration to the desire to obtain education. Here, argument is that the desire to acquire higher levels of education leads individuals to migrate from rural to urban areas, or abroad, where educational facilities tend to be located. However, these two perspectives are inadequate to explain

---

unhappy with their traditional occupations.



the reason why even secondary school-educated students in Gurail choose to migrate<sup>20</sup>. The Gurail experience suggests that it is not only non-rural human capital or a lack of educational institutions that may lead better educated individuals to migrate, but also rural attitudes towards ‘work for educated people’<sup>21</sup>. Such attitudes may contribute to, if not absolutely compel, out-migration.

Universally, educational attainment is associated with social status attainment. Education enhances prestige in two ways. First, education distinguishes between those who are educated and those who are not, thus dichotomizing society. Secondly, education is an avenue for acquiring high-paying work and ensuring upward social mobility. Although villagers have witnessed the declining power of education in recent decades because of the discrepancy between population growth and job creation, families in Gurail still hold the view that education is a way of acquiring high-paying white-collar jobs. In other words, being educated means not having to do the type of work that uneducated people do. Broadly, villagers categorize work according to that for educated individuals and that for uneducated individuals. Villagers do not look positively upon an educated person who engages in menial work or does the work of non-educated individuals. The Bengali term ‘*shikit manuser kaz*’ (work of educated people), which is a widely-used phrase in rural Bangladesh, carries enormous significance in Gurail. By ‘*shikit manuser kaz*’, villagers mean the work of educated individuals which is generally associated with non-manual work.

---

<sup>20</sup> The literacy rate among the returnees was 94 per cent, see Table 4.2

<sup>21</sup> Villagers view some types of work / occupation as work for the educated people and some for uneducated people. And the change of this line of demarcation by the educated people brings shame for them.

Raul Pertierra (1992) investigates the overseas labor migration of students in the Philippines. Pertierra looks at the effects of schooling on the perception of opportunities and meaning in a small rural Ilocano community. He notes that such educated individuals frequently romanticize out-migration. They view the local community as a vestige of what is backward and undesirable, while they describe life abroad in the most glowing terms. This view encourages students to seek solutions abroad. The Guriang villagers' experience also reveals the same trend. When I talked to returnees with higher secondary and graduate educational backgrounds, I observe that they frequently overemphasized the importance of *bidesh*, although they were aware of risks inherent in migrating. A main reason for their discomfort with working in the local economy was the low status associated with local employment. Thus, we can see that on one hand, there is a demeaning attitude toward local employment; on the other hand, there is high esteem for overseas employment. In such circumstances, many of the families find overseas employment a viable option to pursue.

## **Summary**

I have shown that it is important to appreciate the social and cultural contexts within which migration decisions are made by the individuals and families involved. I have argued that it is insufficient to examine migration decision-making in terms of the classic economic rational choice theories. If economic behavior is an autonomous realm, one relatively independent of the overarching influence of particular societies and cultures, and if the migrants had been pursuing economic maximization, we ought to have seen a cost-benefit analysis by which each decision-maker calculated all the costs

and benefits of migrating before deciding whether to migrate. However, the empirical research undertaken here showed this not to be the case.

The thesis has explained this discrepancy through an analysis in which economic actions are part of a total social system. These actions bear the impress of the larger structures of which they are a part. Individual acquisitiveness and freedom are subordinate to the larger family and community interests. Therefore, in such contexts, economic theory fails as both an explanatory and a predictive model since it abstracts away the social meanings of income, consumption and exchange. The Gurail experience reveals that migration decision-making is increasingly tied to social status and the notion of a culture of honor. The principle of ‘for the sake of the family’ or ‘all in the family’ mobilizes family members to work towards common interests. We have seen that conformity to family and lineage norms and contributions to group goals or values constitute the most important bases of evaluations leading to status distinctions. As a result, individuals, families, and even *Baris* act persistently as single unit to promote the status honor of their own groups.

Apart from absolute status, relative status also matters to the families with mature migration networks. Relative status prioritizes international migration above everything else and prompts some families to risk their livelihood in an attempt to gain access to overseas employment. People desperately seek overseas employment because they believe in foreign country experience as the means to social transformation. Individuals have little opportunity to enhance their social status from through contacts with local resources, and their limited prospects engender a kind of fatalism that eschews achievement and individual mobility, given this social-cultural setting. Thus, individuals

view international migration as a viable option for enhancing social status. This is because the globalization of mass communication, including TV, film, video, and music, has reinforced dreams of easy life abroad. These "imagined lives" reach even to peasants in remote villages. Migration becomes very attractive, especially in the migration-specific districts in Bangladesh.

## Tables

Table 4.1  
**Summary of Spatial and Social Groupings in Rural Bangladesh<sup>22</sup>**  
 (Ascending Order)

	Typical Size <sup>23</sup>	Function <sup>24</sup>
<i>Ghar</i> (Family)	2 to 10 individuals	Shared living space and eating unit; conjugal unit, fertility decision, land ownership, labor and income pooling
<i>Bari</i> (Collection of Families)	4 to 100 individuals 2 to even 25 families	Social and geographic unit, usually kin connected; social support; domestic activities; shared compound and common areas
<i>Gusti</i> (Lineage)	Usually consists of several hundred individuals	Connected by patrilineal ties, social supports, maintains prestige & honor
<i>Samaj</i> (Society)	Usually consists of several hundreds or even around thousand individuals Usually for several hundred Houses	Maintains proper behavior, administers <i>salish</i> (village court)
<i>Para</i> (Neighborhood)	Usually hundred to thousand individuals; do not totally overlap With <i>samaj</i>	Physical unit; also unit of social Support and identity.
<i>Gram</i> (Village)	Usually several thousand Individuals and consists of usually several <i>para</i>	Physical unit, uncertain boundaries some social support and identity, if village if village is large, then para is more important identity unit within the village
Union	Thousands of individuals And several villages	political unit; holds elections for lowest level of government
<i>Thana</i>	Consists of several unions	Arranges local government functions, tax collection, police force, college, major market, hospitals,
<i>Zila</i> (Districts)	Several thanas	Major government functions, unit of social and cultural identity for migrants.

<sup>22</sup> This Table is adapted from Kuhn, 1999

<sup>23</sup> Number is variable. A general trend has been presented here

<sup>24</sup> Major function is stated.

Table 4.2

**Socio-Economic Characteristics of Returnees and their Families**  
Gurail, N=50, 2001

<b>Person Interviewed</b>	<b>Percents</b>	<b>Level of Educational</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Returnee	92	Primary	38
Others (wife, parents or others in absence of returnees)	8	Secondary	44
		Higher Secondary	6
		Graduate	6
		Illiterate	6
<b>Religion</b>		<b>Types of Family</b>	
Islam	94	Nuclear	30
Hindu	6	Extended	70
<b>Total Members of Family</b>		<b>Number of Earning Members in Family</b>	
1 to 5	38	One Member	50
6 to 9	40	Two Members	12
10 to 13	16	Three Members	4
Above 14	6	Four Members	2
		Zero Member	32
<b>Areas of Economic Activities</b>		<b>Occupation of Migrant</b>	
Self-Employed of families (farming & non-farming)	64	Prior to Migration	
Wage-Employed (farming and non-farming)	4	Self-Employed (farming and non-farming)	60
No earning	32	Waged-Employed	4
Mixed Occupation	0	Unemployed	14
		Student	20
		Returnee (former migrant)	2
<b>Description of Families'</b>		<b>Occupation of Migrants</b>	
<u>Before Migration</u>		After Migration	
No Land	14	Self-Employed	26
Below 50 Decimal	24	Wage-Employed	6
51 to 100 Decimal	22	Unemployed	54
101 to 150 Decimal	18	Others	6
151 to 200 Decimal	16	Missing data	8
Above 201	6		
<u>After Migration</u>		<b>Do you think, Migration has been economically beneficial for your family?</b>	
No Land	42	Yes	8
Below 50 Decimal	12	No	90
51 to 100 Decimal	24	No Comment	2
101 to 150 Decimal	16		
Above 151 0 Decimal	6	<b>Do you want to migrate again?</b>	
Missing Data	2	Yes	58
<b>Role of Migration in family maintenance</b>		No	34
Primary role (basic sustenance)	86	No Comment	8
Secondary Role	8		
No Role	4		
No Comment	2		

Table 4.3

**The Loss and Gain from Labor Migration**

Gurail, N=50, 2001

---

Sources of Raising Funds for Migration			
	Frequencies	Family Condition after Migration	
Personal Savings	92		
Land-Selling or Mortgaging	74	<u>In Terms of Standard of Living</u>	Percents
Money-Lending	76	Better	6
Relatives who live in Bangladesh	62	Same	16
Relatives who work in abroad	8	Worse Off	82
Miscellaneous Sources	18		
		<u>In Terms of Incomes</u>	
Did you pay your all interest-bound loans?		Better	2
	Percents	Same	16
Yes, paid	28	Worse Off	80
No, not paid	30	Missing Data	2
Missing cases	18		
Not Applicable	24	<u>In Terms of Wedding Opportunity</u>	
		Better	4
Did you get back the investment cost of migration?		Same	32
	Percents	Worse Off	22
Yes	18	No Comment	40
No	80	Missing Data	2
Missing Cases	2		
The Financial Gain from Migration <sup>25</sup>	Percents	Gainer or loser from migration	
Not Applicable	80	Loser	80
Only Investment Cost	4	Gainer	14
One plus half of Investment Cost	8	Same	4
Double of Investment Cost	2	Missing Data	2
More than Double of Investment cost	4		
Missing data	2		

---

<sup>25</sup> Calculated from all valuable objects purchased from remittances in Bangladesh or sent from Singapore.

Table 4.4

**Migration Patters of Noya Sikder Bari**

	Family-1	Family-2	Family-3	Family-4	Family-5	Family-6	Family-7
<b>Total Members</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>
Male	7	5	6	3	5	2	4
Female	4	4	4	4	3	4	5
Total Members of Migration Age (Male) (18-45)	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Total Migrant</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
Active Migrant (presently)	3	2	2	0	1	0	0
Returnee	1	1	1	0	1	0	1
Prospective Migrant	2	1	1	2	2	1	2
Never Migrant	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Years of First Trips</b>	1993 (1) 1994 (2) 1995 (1)	1994 (1) 1995 (1)	1994(1) 1995 (1) 1997 (1)	0	1995 (1) 1997 (1) 1998 (1)	0	1996 (1)
<b>Number of Trips</b>							
First Migrant	3	2	2	0	2	0	2
Second Migrant	2	2	2		2		
Third Migrant	2		1		1		
<b>Who helped mostly in the Migration Process?</b>							
Kinship	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Yes
Friends	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Formal Recruiting Agent	-	-	-	-	-	-	-



Table 4.5

**Cultural Construction of Work, N=50, 2001**


---

Were you ready to engage in similar type of work in Bangladesh that you did in Singapore?

Responses	Percents
No	84
Yes	14
No Comment	2

Are you presently ready to work in the areas as follows? (NC= No Comment)

Wage laborer (any form)	Yes: 4 %,	No: 96 %
Rickshaw pulling or similar type activities	Yes: 2% ,	No: 96% NC: 2
Agriculture or similar type of work as Owner:	Yes: 70 %,	No: 30
Agriculture or similar as Non-owner:	Yes: 16%,	No: 78%, NC: 6%
Small business as Owner	Yes: 44%,	No: 54%, NC: 2%
Construction work that you did in Singapore	Yes: 6%,	No: 92, NC: 2%
Clearer or similar type	Yes: 2%,	No: 96, NC: 2%

---