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*Constrained Labour as Instituted Process  
Transnational Contract Work  
and Circular Migration in Late Capitalism*

**Abstract**

The paper proposes a critical understanding of contemporary “low-skilled,” transnational contract work/circular migration as a guest-worker regime. Rather than approach circular migration as an instrument of development, or a human rights problem, this paper situates it within the larger, historical debates over the status of labour that emphasise questions of surplus extraction. Drawing on ethnographic research among Bangladeshi male migrants in Singapore and return workers in Bangladesh, the paper explores two crucial moments in the life of migrants—of choosing overseas contract work, and of leaving. In each moment, it highlights certain mechanisms that push migrants along the porous line between free and un-free work, incrementally toward the latter.

*Keywords:* Transnational; Contract Work; Guestwork; Circular Migration; Bangladesh; Singapore.

THIS PAPER IS PART of a larger project on temporary transnational contract work and circular migration, which bring millions of workers from poorer parts of the world to more affluent economies every year in search of better economic and social opportunities.<sup>1</sup> This form of work and the cross-border movement it entails is referred to variously as temporary worker programs, guest-worker programs, managed migration, and now, increasingly, as circular migration within the field of migration studies [Castles 2006; Skeldon 2010; Vertovec 2007; Newland 2009; Hugo 2013; Griffith 2014].<sup>2</sup> While transnational managed or circular migration today can involve both “highly-skilled” professionals and “low-skilled” manual labour, this

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/migration.html>

<sup>2</sup> The term “managed” migration is more likely to be used in North America, whereas

“circular” migration is more in vogue elsewhere in the world.

paper is concerned exclusively with the latter, with particular focus on male migrant workers from Bangladesh.

Circular migration as “a pattern of human mobility” is not new—the term had first appeared in the literature on internal migration from the 1960s and 1970s in the developing world. But in recent years it has gained renewed significance in the context of particular forms of repeat movements of people across international boundaries, occasioned mainly by the conditions of the work-mobility contracts that disallow such migrants from settling abroad. Defined as “a [...] fluid pattern of human mobility among countries” [Newland, Mendoza, and Terrazas 2008: 2], circular migration requires migrants to tack back and forth between ‘home’ and typically a number of different ‘abroads’ in the course of a single working life.<sup>3</sup> Requiring repeated long periods of separation from families on the one hand, and virtually no prospect of settling abroad on the other, this new kind of potentially life-long sojourner mobility is fundamentally different from the largely permanent emigration that resulted from earlier mass movements of peoples across international borders—be it through enslavement, indentured labour regimes, or voluntary migration [Tinker 1974; Jain 1984; Cohen 1995; Kale 1998; Yang 2003; Northrup 2005]. Instead, circular/managed migrants are perhaps best understood as guest-workers—a term that succinctly captures the ambivalent status of migrants who move legally, but are not welcome to stay on in the host society beyond the period of contract [Hahamovitch 2003; Surak 2013].

While the historical roots of this form of labour mobility lie in the late nineteenth century [Mozambican workers in South African mines, and Polish agricultural workers in Germany],<sup>4</sup> and in the post-World War II guestworker regimes in Western Europe and North America,<sup>5</sup> contemporary circular migration began in the mid 1970s with the large-scale importation of Egyptian and Asian labour to the Persian Gulf, and then to the rapidly growing Asian “Tiger” economies in the 1980s, in what is the third phase in the history of guest-worker programmes

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars distinguish circular migration from contract migration that involves “more or less forced and managed forms of temporary residence” [Zoomers, cited in Skeldon 2010: 24]. I prefer to use the terms circular and managed migration interchangeably to refer to all labour regimes designed to keep non-citizen labour insecure and disposable. In this, I align with Stephen Castles’ description of circular migration as a “more positive label” for compulsory temporary migration [Castles 2009: 21]. Perhaps the

definition of managed migration—as a legal arrangement to allow “foreign nationals [...] [to enter] the domestic labor markets to perform designated economic services—most commonly seasonal work [Griffith 2014: xii]—offers a more candid appraisal of work and mobility regimes that enforce temporariness.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert 1990; Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman 1991; Hahamovitch 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Griffith 2006; Castles 2006; Surak 2013.

[Hahamovitch 2003]. In recent decades, they have resurfaced in Europe, North America, and Australia, now under the rubric of circular/managed migration [Castles 2006; Hugo 2013; UNFPA and IOM, 2013; Commission of the European Communities 2005a; Griffith 2014].<sup>6</sup>

While the definitional shift—from guest-worker programmes to circular migration—seems to privilege questions about the modes of labour *circulation*, this paper is concerned primarily with the mechanisms of *surplus value appropriation* within this kind of labour-mobility regimes. It approaches circular/managed migration in terms of the larger, historical debates over the unclear divide between free and unfree work, and the *telos* implicit in the understanding that “un-freedom” belongs to the past, while “proper” capitalism is based on “free” wage labour [Corrigan 1977; Miles 1987; Steinfeld 2001; Banaji 2003; Brass 2003; Van der Linden 2008; Stanziani 2008]. Rather than evaluate circular migration in terms of the putative connection between migration and development, or as a problem of human rights abuse of workers—approaches that typically marginalize the workers as *subjects*—this paper brings together a historical and macro-structural theoretical framework with ethnographic research among Bangladeshi male workers in Singapore and return workers in Bangladesh, to offer, hopefully, a more nuanced and textured account of this form of transnational labour mobility at this specific historical juncture.

### *Circular migration in development and human rights discourse*

The connection between migration and economic development has been at the heart of debates since the mid twentieth century [Castles 2009; Bakewell 2007; Portes 1997; Portes and Böröcz 1989; Massey et al. 1998; Zolberg 1989; Skeldon 1997; Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc 2003; Brettell and Hollifield 2008; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011]. A currently dominant understanding in academic and policy

<sup>6</sup> In the US, admissions of temporary contract workers nearly doubled between 1996 and 2006 [Thomas 2014]. In Australia, temporary admissions outnumber permanent resettlements [Hugo, 2004]. Among the OECD countries, the temporary migration of foreign workers has increased by 4% to 5% annually since 2000 [Abella 2006]. In Singapore, the foreign born constitutes 40% of the total workforce [Hong Phua et al. 2013], in

Malaysia, about 25% [Kaur 2010]. Official figures quoted in the press in 2012 claimed foreign workers comprise 66% of the workforce in Saudi Arabia (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/10/saudi-labour-crackdown-idUSL5N0CV38I20130410>), and 90% in Qatar (The Guardian, 25 September 2013). <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/revealed-qatars-world-cup-slaves>.

circles seems to be that migration—especially when it is temporary and circular—helps address the dynamics of stagnating or negative population growth. In short, it is a solution to the dual crises of labour shortage in the wealthier economies, and young, surplus populations facing chronic unemployment and underemployment in poorer countries [Ruhs 2006; IOM 2008a; Coleman 2006; Castles 2013]. Given this apparent mismatch between the global availability of, and the demand for labour, circular migration seems to offer the perfect solution, especially as it becomes increasingly clear that not all “low-skilled work” can be exported to less affluent economies [Castles 2013; OECD 2007]. It is especially appealing to policy makers in the affluent labour importing countries since it allows them to tap into the vast labour resources of low-income societies without burdening in the long run their own socio-political equilibrium in ways in which permanent/long-term immigration allegedly does. To echo Kristin Surak’s observations on guest-workers, “their entrance can be controlled, exit monitored and employment options restricted” in order to “maximize economic utility while minimizing social cost” for the receiving economy [Surak 2013: 88]. As a result, non-permanent, circular and managed migration has emerged as “the rage in international policy circles” [Skeldon 2010: 22; Ozkul 2011]. Even in North America, where shortage of labour due to population decline is not a pressing issue at this time, demand for “low cost and highly productive” H-2 temporary/guest workers has been growing in a range of occupations that are “socially constructed as undesirable through the persistence of low wages and poor working conditions” [Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010: 289].

Of course, even the most ardent proponents of this form of migration acknowledge that transnational contract workers—female and male—can be exposed to extraordinary discrimination and vulnerabilities as non-citizen labour in most labour-importing societies. A second important strand within the literature on circular/managed migration is thus focused on describing the most egregious, illegal abuses inflicted on foreign workers in the context of trafficking [Koslowski 2006; Friebel and Guriev 2006; Piper 2008; Afsar 2009; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005]. Recent discussions on the plight of South Asian contract workers in the Gulf and guestworkers in the agricultural and food-processing industries in the US might serve as examples of this particular discourse based on the idea of human rights violations [Ross 2015; SPLC 2013]. Another context in which abuse of workers and their extreme vulnerability has attracted considerable attention is domestic work, which brings millions of

women from low-income countries to affluent societies as part of a “global care chain” [Parreñas 2015; Lan 2006; Chin 1998]. Following from these two main trends, a third persistent, if related, concern within the international migration literature focuses on the “effective management of migration flows” [Martin, Abella, and Kuptsch 2006; Commission of the European Communities 2005b; De Haas 2005; De Haas 2007; IOM 2008b; Skeldon 2010].

The current paper builds on all these useful discussions, but my interest here lies in some of the specific mechanisms of surplus extraction that are germane in guest-worker/temporary contract work arrangements, and not exceptions to them. Simply put, I ask: Does transnational temporary contract work qualify as “free” wage labour? If not, how should we define this form of work? Indeed, how do we define “free” labour? And when does labour become unfree?

### *The Free-Unfree continuum*

The classical Marxian understanding of the free-unfree divide proceeds from the assumption that free wage labour is when the proletariat can sell his/her labour-power freely as a commodity. To quote historian Jan Lucassen:

Probably the most important distinction between free and unfree labour is “the freedom whether or not to choose one’s own employer and therefore one’s labour conditions, or to choose one’s means of production” [1997: 47].

Another way to think about the difference between free labour and unfree labour is that while “unfree labour is subject to physical or legal compulsion [...] free labour is not” [Steinfeld and Engerman 1997: 115].

However, as scholars have pointed out, historically, free wage labourers rarely had a complete free choice of employers; while unfree labour arrangements were not necessarily devoid of laxities [Lucassen 1997]. For instance, in his critical re-evaluation of “second serfdom” in seventeenth and eighteenth century Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, Alessandro Stanziani notes the presence of a set of legal constraints on labor mobility that were not quite the opposites of “free labour” in the West, as is conventionally assumed. Nor were so-called “free” labor contracts and institutions in the West quite so free, for they often “placed many more constraints on workers than is usually acknowledged” [Stanziani 2009: 359]. Indeed, it seems that “the boundary between free

and forced labour remained uncertain” in both thought and practice in much of the world [Stanziani 2008: 27], and a “whole spectrum of forms of dependence [...] [and] bondage” obtained well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century” [Stanziani 2013: 1]. Dichotomies such as free/unfree, forced/voluntary or coercion/choice, thus, merely serve to obfuscate the fluidity of labour forms that more often than not fall somewhere in between.

These debates within labour history have been raised primarily in the context of studies of the historical shift from slavery or serfdom to its aftermath and/or the institution of wage labour at the beginning of industrial capitalism [Steinfeld 2001; Miles 1987; Stanziani 2008]. They have also appeared in work from other parts of the world that highlights the continued existence of shades of unfreedom throughout the modern history of wage labour [Amin and Van der Linden 1996; Lucassen 1997; Kerr 1997; Van der Linden 2008; Breman, Guerin and Prakash 2009; Stanziani 2013]. The social scientific literature dealing with the present meanwhile tends to cast the problem of labour relations in terms of the persistence/intensification of the informalisation of work both in the global South and the North [Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987; Chant and Pedwell 2008], and a incremental replacement of the proletariat by a “precariat” in the context of neo-liberal late capitalism [Standing 2011; Doogan 2009; Vosko 2006]. Nuanced debates over the historical tensions between free and unfree labour have not been central to these discussions of precariousness in the present moment.<sup>7</sup> To the extent unfree work in the West today is acknowledged *at all*, it is assumed to be in the consumptive sphere of sex work, and here, the discussion can be hijacked easily by a discourse of illegality and trafficking: i.e. in terms of aberrations, not normalcy.<sup>8</sup>

But what about contract workers, who are brought from poorer countries to the heart of the capitalist world to work legally in sectors that were historically the preserve of proletarianised labour, such as shipyards, skilled construction work, and manufacturing? Unlike free-wage workers—the protagonists of conventional labour histories—their experiences show significant lack of choice, even in the absence of trafficking or other obvious markers of physical coercion/compulsion. Where, then, on the porous line between free and unfree labour should we place the experience of contemporary circular migrants/guest-workers engaged in temporary contract

<sup>7</sup> For two examples of historical accounts of migration and precarious labour, see Cohen 1987, and Castles 2015.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent attempt to raise the question of unfree work in the context of temporary work today, see Fudge and Strauss 2013.

work, not in peripheral locations, or in the past, or within the reproductive/domestic sphere, but at the very core of the capitalist world-economy, today, within what is considered to be the sphere of productive work?<sup>9</sup> And what are some of the implications of this late 20<sup>th</sup> century “return” or “resurrection” (as Castles 2006 would have it) of transnational temporary contract work/guestworker programmes—which are, by definition, constrained labour regimes—for larger debates about the status of labour within the historical arc of global capitalism?

In the following section, I present excerpts from the life stories of Bangladeshi circular migrants to address the questions I raise above. The stories foreground two significant moments in the workers’ lives—the moment of choosing to seek overseas work and the moment of recruitment—and the mechanisms that rob prospective migrants of effective freedom. If it is indeed “the state that creates” guest-workers by simultaneously “sanctioning their traversal of its borders and ensuring the transience of their stay,”<sup>10</sup> the stories I analyse here foreground some of the ripple effects of legal constraints imposed by states on the choices that transnational migrant workers face. The paper ends with a brief conclusion in which I highlight some of the larger implications of the analysis presented here.

### *Method*

The material I present below is drawn from three bouts of fieldwork between 2007 and 2011—in Singapore and in Bangladesh. The paper focuses mainly on three life stories of migrant workers, and draws on two others, contextualized within analysis of the manpower industry in Bangladesh, drawn from available statistics and secondary literature.<sup>11</sup> Of the five men, one left Bangladesh in 1986, two in 1997, while two others in 2006-7. Together the five stories afford a unique glimpse into the experiential dimension of an

<sup>9</sup> I use the term “productive” strictly in the sense of labour “which produces surplus-value” [Marx 1961: 509].

<sup>10</sup> Surak 2013: 88.

<sup>11</sup> The larger project rests on seventeen life histories of Bangladeshi male workers that I recorded—nine in Singapore, and eight

return workers in Bangladesh, and twenty odd in-depth interviews with NGO workers and academics in Singapore, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, as well as with government officials, sub-agents, and women in migrant households in Bangladesh.

expanding global phenomenon. Are these life stories representative of the millions of temporary contract workers moving across the globe every year? The accounts certainly resonate deeply with the many stories I heard from other workers in Singapore, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. They also bear out—albeit in broad strokes—the pictures emerging from studies of temporary migrant populations elsewhere in the world. But my aim in this paper is not to arrive at widely generalizable claims. Instead, like in any “small N” exploratory study, ethnographic work, and oral history analysis, the interest here is to “generate a subjective understanding” of not just what people do, but the meanings they attach to their actions, and a narrative based on “richness, complexity and detail” [Baker and Edwards 2012: 4-5; Thomson 2007] of the world of male circular/managed migrants, seen through the eyes of underprivileged young men with limited livelihood options in Bangladesh, for whom legal permanent emigration to an affluent economy is well nigh impossible.

In Singapore I met most of the workers in the historic Little India district,<sup>12</sup> which caters to the specific needs of the island’s South Asian community that includes both middle/upper class citizens and residents, and temporary migrant workers from the subcontinent. Although the latter remain entirely marginal to Singaporean society’s imagination of itself,<sup>13</sup> at least on weekends they more or less take over the alleys and markets of this area. While I met several key interlocutors at two sites in Little India—a travel agency run by a Bangladeshi man, and the office of the NGO, Humanitarian Organization for Migratory Economics (or HOME)—potential interviewees were just as likely to emerge serendipitously, through chance encounters that sometimes led to additional meetings when I could record detailed life histories.<sup>14</sup> In Bangladesh, I interviewed workers in Dhaka, the capital, and in two villages I visited—Lakhipur in the Noakhali district in the South-east of Bangladesh, and Gazipur, near Dhaka—when I stayed in the homes of “return” workers. Through the good offices of these men, I met many others who work or had worked overseas.

<sup>12</sup> A centre for a cattle industry and the site of a jail for Indian convicts in the mid nineteenth century, Serangoon Road at the heart of Little India metamorphosed into a regular commercial and residential area in the 1930s [Chang 2000].

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, “Little India: Home Away from Home”, December 14, 2013.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/little-india-home-away-from-home> (Retrieved on July 15, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> I first met Karim Hussein—a man I quote below—on a bus one evening near Little India.

The interviews were conducted in Bengali—a language I share with Bangladeshis. There are of course significant differences between my interlocutors and I—a researcher/professor in Singapore and the US, and a woman who travelled alone. Class and gender differences seemed to present greater hurdles at first in Singapore, but shared ethnicity and my familiarity with Bangladesh proved to be valuable resources in overcoming the workers' reserve.

In Bangladesh, the situation was considerably different. In the villages, households that had members of the family working abroad commanded a certain respect; my interest in their lives seemed to add to that stature. Here, as in Singapore, I met and spoke to many workers, in their homes, at the village market, on the premises of the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and the government's own overseas placement wing BOESL (Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited) and outside travel agencies specializing in exporting labour. All these conversations—some involved and often extremely informative—helped me piece together the story of young men with limited resources caught up in the circuits of transnational sojourner mobility, and the vast and unruly manpower industry in Bangladesh that profits from them.

But before we delve into the specific life-stories, perhaps a few words about Bangladesh as a sending country would be useful to set the context.

### *Bangladesh*

In the course of the last three decades, Bangladesh—a country with a population of about 162.5 million people, a per capita annual income (GDP) of around US\$ 1,010, with 31.5% living under US\$ 1/day,<sup>15</sup> and nearly 70% of the population living in rural areas—has emerged as one of the most significant sources of non-permanent contract labour in the world.<sup>16</sup> Official estimates indicate that nearly 2000 Bangladeshis leave every day to take up employment overseas. In 2012 alone, some

<sup>15</sup> 40% of Bangladeshis living under US\$ 1/day in 2005. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>.

<sup>16</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) <http://www.iom.org.bd/category/highlights/how-bangladeshi-migrants-are->

[warned-against-unsafe-migrate-for-overseas-work/](http://www.iom.org.bd/category/highlights/how-bangladeshi-migrants-are-warned-against-unsafe-migrate-for-overseas-work/). See also, Zaklul Alam, "Migration Scenario in Bangladesh" [https://www.academia.edu/7072149/Migration\\_scenario\\_in\\_Bangladesh\\_Prospets\\_problems\\_and\\_policy\\_issues](https://www.academia.edu/7072149/Migration_scenario_in_Bangladesh_Prospets_problems_and_policy_issues).

608,000 Bangladeshis travelled abroad; another 208,000 followed in the first six months of 2013.<sup>17</sup> Altogether, over 7 million Bangladeshis reportedly worked abroad in 2013-14.<sup>18</sup>

Given that vast majority of the Bangladeshi overseas workers are classified as “low-skilled” or “unskilled” [Kibria 2011; Lian and Rahman 2006],<sup>19</sup> clearly, the bulk of the remittances that the country receives from the manual contract workers/circular migrants toiling abroad. In 2012 the official remittance figures was 14.2 billion USD, which was equivalent to 10% of Bangladesh’s GDP and more than 12 times the foreign direct investment (FDI) that the country received. The contributions of the transnational circular migrants, who travel typically in search of contract work abroad, have been significant enough for the state to hail them as “*shonar manush*” or “person(s) of gold”. Since the proportion of women in this transnationally mobile workforce from Bangladesh is reportedly low,<sup>20</sup> it is fair to say that it is still very much the male “low-skilled” contract labourer who embodies this particular euphemism.<sup>21</sup>

Who, then, *are* these workers seeking this form of work and the repeated long-term sojourns that it seems to involve? And what propels them to this life-altering decision to go abroad?

<sup>17</sup> Migration News, July 2013, vol. 20, 3; Migration News, October 2013, vol. 20, 4. The total number of migrants from Bangladesh going overseas fell to 405,000 in 2013, against 608,000 in 2012 and 800,000 in 2008. According to the January 2014 report by Migration News, private recruiters explain this in terms of the Government’s growing preference for Memoranda of Understanding with foreign governments that by pass the private recruitment industry’s involvement in some cases. [http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3889\\_0\\_3\\_0](http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3889_0_3_0) (viewed on January 20, 2014.)

<sup>18</sup> Migration News, Oct 2013. A 2010 publication from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) quotes a similar number (BMET Smranika: 42). For additional statistics, see [www.bmet.org.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction](http://www.bmet.org.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction).

<sup>19</sup> Between 1980 and 2005, Bangladeshi manual workers going overseas were classified as “unskilled” (50%), ‘semi-skilled’ (16%), or “skilled” (31%) (BMET, Annual

Labour Migration from Bangladesh by Major Destinations, 1980-2005, cited in Kibria 2011: 21).

<sup>20</sup> Women comprised only 13 percent of Bangladeshi workers going overseas in 2013. In 2011, this figure was reportedly 5.38 percent (ILO, “Gender and Migration from Bangladesh”. [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms\\_310418.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_310418.pdf) Retrieved on September 2, 2015). In contrast, women comprised 48.3 percent of the total overseas Filipino workforce in 2012 (Philippine Commission on Women, 2014 “Statistics on Filipino Women and Men’s Overseas Employment”. <http://www.pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201405/statistics-filipino-women-and-mens-overseas-employment>, retrieved on September 2, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Women in Bangladesh migrate from rural to urban areas to work in the garments industry, or as domestic workers [Kabeer and Mahmud 2004].

*Choices**Mahmud Ali*

In 1988, a young man named Mahmud Ali (a pseudonym) was recruited from Bangladesh to travel to Iraq as a contract worker. Mahmud had been doing “construction work” for about ten years in Dhaka, first as a young apprentice cleaning up on construction sites, and eventually learning the important “skill” of “rod shuttering.”<sup>22</sup> As he explains: “To build a house, you need [rod shuttering] [...] For instance if you have to build a ceiling, you need a shutter”. This was difficult work and Mahmud was proud of his hard-earned abilities. He was also extremely grateful that he had the opportunity to acquire this skill, which would eventually take him out of the grinding poverty that had shaped his life until then. Mahmud was only eight years old when his father Zafar—a sharecropper in the Noakhali district of south eastern Bangladesh—died suddenly of typhoid, leaving behind his pregnant wife and three young sons to fend for themselves, with no source of income and no home. As Mahmud recalls: “[We] had nothing [...] No one wanted to give us work [...] we were too young [...] We spent maybe ten days in one place, and fifteen in [another]. This is how our days were passing.”

Unable to stand the near starvation, Mahmud’s elder brother, who was only ten years old at the time, ran away leaving Mahmud to shoulder the responsibilities of feeding the family. Another year or so passed in this desperate struggle, as the family lived off the charity of neighbours and kin, and the vagaries of odd jobs. Then, one day, a relative suggested to Mahmud that he go to a city, maybe Dhaka, the capital, to find work as a house servant—a common enough source of employment for young boys and girls coming from poor rural households. Mahmud agreed, thus embarking on the first phase of his life as a migrant worker—at this point, from the village to the city. He was barely ten years old when he was obliged to make this “choice”.

Mahmud’s experience in this regard is hardly atypical. In Bangladesh, a vast majority of outmigration from villages is in fact internal migration from rural to urban areas [Afsar 2003: 2]. Two distinct groups of people typically undertake such migration: those who have some means and wish to travel to cities for better prospects for themselves and their offspring, and those who are landless and

<sup>22</sup> Used in concrete casting projects.

destitute, and hence usually have nothing to lose. Clearly, Mahmud falls into this latter group, which includes large numbers of children.

Existing macro level statistics further clarify the picture: a 2010 report by the UNICEF indicates that 4.7 million children between the ages of 5-14 worked in Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup> An overwhelming majority of child workers—reportedly 93 per cent—<sup>24</sup> meanwhile are engaged in informal work, including domestic service. And a 2007 baseline survey by the ILO reports that of the 1.3 million domestic workers in Bangladesh at the time, 421,000 were children.<sup>25</sup> A sizeable proportion of child workers are likely to be migrants from rural areas. In contrast to the overwhelming experience of widespread discrimination, insecurity, and abuse that many rural-urban migrants—especially those in “hidden” jobs such as domestic labour<sup>26</sup>—routinely face, Mahmud seems to have been lucky to be employed in a household that treated him with relative kindness, even generosity.

Mahmud’s dedication as a house cleaner pleased his employers—a wealthy family with a successful business in construction. When Mahmud was fourteen, the head of the family encouraged him to start learning some form of skilled work to ensure a more secure future. And, so, Mahmud’s apprenticeship in the construction industry began. Eventually, it is precisely these skills that would provide him the first opportunity to travel abroad. As he recalls:

After six years of learning this work [shuttering], one day I found out that men are being recruited to work in Iraq [...] It was advertised in the papers, but I also heard from people around me that men were going.

Mahmud decided to try his luck at the interview. A fairly long examination of sorts ensued, during which an “Iraqi delegator” [*sic.*] asked him questions with the mediation of an interpreter since at that time Mahmud understood neither English nor Arabic. In his words:

<sup>23</sup> Unicef, Child Labour In Bangladesh 2010: 1. [http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Child\\_labour.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Child_labour.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Report on National Child Labour Survey, 2002-2003, cited in Unicef, Child Labour 2010: 2.

<sup>25</sup> International Labour Organisation (ILO), Baseline Survey on Child Domestic Labour in Bangladesh, 2006, cited in Unicef, Child Labour, 2010: 3. Average wages of domestic workers reportedly ranged between BDT 500-600 (US\$ 7)/month. [http://www.itucsi.org/IMG/pdf/presentation\\_of\\_domestic\\_](http://www.itucsi.org/IMG/pdf/presentation_of_domestic_)

[workers\\_rights\\_network\\_dwrn\\_in\\_bangladesh\\_.pdf](http://www.itucsi.org/IMG/pdf/presentation_of_domestic_workers_rights_network_dwrn_in_bangladesh_.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Unicef, Child Labour 2010: 3. According to the Human Rights Watch, children comprise 30 per cent of domestic workers worldwide, and are extremely vulnerable. Human Rights Watch, The ILO Domestic Workers Convention: New Standards to Fight Discrimination, Exploitation, and Abuse, 2013: 2. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/2013ilo\\_dw\\_convention\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/2013ilo_dw_convention_brochure.pdf)

[The Iraqi man] would sit here and ask, “What is the height of this beam? How much casting do you need for this roof? To tie rod, how much material do you need?” These kinds of questions [...] or say, he would ask us to take measurements with a measuring tape [...] So I got through the interview.

Now, there was only one hurdle left before Mahmud could begin his life as a transnational contract worker: he had to pay for his flight to Iraq. Needless to say, Mahmud did not have that much money, so he decided to ask his employer, whom he refers to as Saheb, for a loan. His employer agreed to lend him this sum citing the “hard work” that Mahmud had done for him for “a long time.” And thus began the second phase in Mahmud’s life as a migrant worker: in this instance, travelling abroad. As he recalled with a glint in his eye: “I still remember, it was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August in 1988 [when I left for Iraq].”

Mahmud’s example alerts us to a crucial element in the story of circular migration: the link between movement of people within the territorial boundaries of a given country, and across international borders. Mahmud was of course already engaged as a migrant worker in Dhaka *before* the large-scale organized export of manual labour from Bangladesh to overseas locations began in 1976. But he was too young, and at least for the first decade of his time in Dhaka, both too poor to pay agents, and too lacking in appreciable skills to qualify for direct recruitment to overseas employment. For such workers, internal migration from the village to the city was often a crucial step.<sup>27</sup>

Mahmud’s story further reveals how a worker can inhabit a range of locations in the free-unfree continuum in the course of a single lifetime, starting as a destitute child to become a skilled wage labourer. However, his career hardly confirms a story of unidirectional movement from lower to higher skills, and from lesser to greater freedom. Indeed as his life story unfolds, we learn that he would never be completely free to choose where he should work and for how long. After thirteen years of intermittent overseas work, Mahmud would be “persuaded” to come back, first to engage in care work for his terminally ill first employer—who had loaned him the money for his first trips abroad—and then to stay on and work as a caretaker for his employer’s properties. At the time of his “return” from Malaysia in 1996, Mahmud had an offer of a supervisory position in a construction project in Thailand that would bring a considerable increase in pay, as

<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Mahmud’s experience is similar to the “step” migration of Bangladeshi female overseas workers [Afsar 2009: 9] or Mexican H-2B workers who acquire the necessary skills for factory food production in plants within Mexico before moving to the US to pick crab meat [Griffith 2014: xxiv] or even the “stepwise international migration”

of “low capital” Filipina domestic workers on their way to “preferred destination countries” in the West [Paul 2011: 1843]. Of course, Filipina domestic workers are more educated; their ambitions and mobility options are, thus, likely to be different from other migrants seeking “low-skilled” work overseas.

well as an opportunity to earn more as a labour broker by recruiting ten other men to work under him.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Mahmud was on the verge of becoming a labour contractor, but was obliged instead to return to Bangladesh, forever.

But let us leave Mahmud Ali here and listen in on another man on the verge of a life-changing decision.

### *Karim Hussain*

Nearly a decade later, in 1997, a young man, whom I will call Karim Hussain was slowly coming to the realization that overseas work may offer his only access to a decent livelihood. He was barely twenty years old at the time. Karim was born in a village in the Kumilla district of Bangladesh. His father, Nurul, had a business of onions that was the main source of income for this family of eight. The “economic situation” of the family was, to quote Karim, “neither very good, nor so bad... but it was not a middle class family.” In spite of their modest means, Karim remembers his childhood as “happy.” He describes his father, Nurul, as a “different kind of man” who had been keen on educating his children, including his daughters. Of the two brothers and four sisters, Karim was apparently the brightest, and there seems to have been some hope that one day, he might move on to a middle class occupation. In 1996, Karim completed his schooling with Commerce as his focus from a reputable institution in Kumilla. His results, as he put it shyly, “were not so bad. I got 2<sup>nd</sup> division”, and he hoped that with further studies in the field of Commerce, he would find work in a bank. Unfortunately, by 1996 when he was on the verge of entering college, the family business had become quite unstable. As Karim recalls:

At that time...the situation of our family was really quite bad because my father’s business...was not doing ...well.... Even...[then], my Abba said to me, “If you want to study further, I will do my best to help you....” But the way I saw it...it would be *really* difficult...

As Karim explained, the monthly cost of staying in Kumilla city and continuing his college education would be five thousand Taka (US\$ 64 in 2015). This was “a lot of money” in those days for any family of modest means and Karim admits to feeling guilty about the projected cost of his education when the family was struggling to make

<sup>28</sup> An arrangement in which an experienced worker recruits a team of men to work under his supervision is known as the *kan-gany* or *maistry* system [Northrup 2005: 11].

ends meet. So after considerable soul-searching, he decided instead to try his luck at contract work abroad. In his words, I went to my father and said, “Abba, let’s do something. I will go abroad... Let us see what is in my fate.”

Karim’s story suggests that the modernizationist dream of upward social mobility through higher education and eventual induction into a middle class occupation and status is in fact unsustainable by the exigencies of a “not quite middle class” location. In this context, Karim’s poignant insistence that his decision to go abroad was his own, and not something that he felt pressured into doing shows, I think, his understanding of the manifold structural constraints within which families such as his must exist. And he tries to “man up,” so to say, to the responsibility of being a provider—even if not the sole breadwinner—which men from his socio-economic location must shoulder early in the course of a typical life.

Note also that by the mid 1990s when Karim was making this life-course altering decision, “going abroad” as a contract worker was already a common option for teenagers like him in many Bangladeshi villages. The endemic lack of decent work opportunities in Bangladesh, coupled with the presence in the villages of increasing numbers of returning overseas workers—typically on leave between successive sojourns abroad—and their stories of better livelihoods, and the adventures and pleasures associated with overseas work, created an environment in which *bidesh kara* (going abroad) had become arguably something akin to a rite of passage for men such as Karim.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Karim’s elder brother Kashem had already been to Singapore for a few years, and had apparently disliked the experience. He had even warned Karim that life in Singapore was “too hard.” As Karim recalls: “But I said ...everyone goes. Why don’t I go see what happens?”

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, between 1976 (when the first contract migrants started going abroad from Bangladesh) and 2005, five million Bangladeshi workers travelled abroad. A mere 2.9% of these migrants were reportedly professional; the rest were either unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled manual labourers [Kibria 2011: 21]. These migrants were typically young men, and the main destinations in the beginning were the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, viz. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. As another report from the ILO notes, “Over a period of 33 years between 1976 and 2008,

<sup>29</sup> For similar discussions on the “culture of (em)migration elsewhere”, see Kandel and Massey 2002; Parreñas 2015.

Bangladesh has sent through regular channels alone more than 6.26 million migrant workers mostly to Middle Eastern countries.” Or as another source points out, nearly 82% of the 832,609 workers going abroad in 2007 from Bangladesh were headed to GCC countries [Afsar 2009: 1]. Even today, two thirds of the remittances to Bangladesh come from the GCC countries.<sup>30</sup> However, since 1980, other destinations, especially Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea, as well as Japan, Lebanon, Mauritius and Libya have also figured prominently [Kibria 2011].

The main attraction for overseas jobs is certainly the difference in “income”. According to a survey by the World Bank, in 1999 an average public sector official in Bangladesh earned about 7000 Taka, i.e. about 150 USD (250 Singapore dollars) per month [Mukherjee 2001: 4-5]. Even if Karim had somehow managed to complete a college education, as an entry-level employee, his earnings would likely be lower, probably closer to 5000 Taka or about 60 USD per month (2007 conversion rates). In contrast, in 1997, as an unskilled new worker in Singapore, Karim’s basic pay<sup>31</sup> was about 14 SGD for an eight-hour workday, which amounted to around 360-420 SGD or about 250-290 USD per month. The fact that migrant contract workers inevitably undertake overtime work that pays higher than the basic rate, meant that Karim’s monthly earnings were closer to 500 SGD or around 350 USD.<sup>32</sup> And this difference in projected earnings, coupled with the consistently high proportion of underemployment that plagues Bangladesh,<sup>33</sup> means that overseas employment seems less a matter of choice and increasingly one of necessity for millions of Bangladeshi workers—even with the steep initial cost of travel that leaves many families in a state of near destitution, and the backbreaking work schedule that most workers have to contend with abroad.

<sup>30</sup> Migration News, Volume 20, Number 3, July 2013. [http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3851\\_0\\_3\\_0](http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3851_0_3_0) (Viewed on December 13, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Basic pay for Karim was 14 SGD for an 8 hours workday. Even if he worked every day of the month, his pay would be just about 420 SGD per month.

<sup>32</sup> Karim’s testimony regarding the wage levels are supported by other workers’ testimonies. The wage levels in Singapore’s construction industry have stagnated for the last decade or more. The Straits Times (January 3, 2013) reported that in contrast to the Middle East and Cyprus, where a construc-

tion worker could expect to earn 1000 SGD per month, in Singapore “construction workers [...] from India and Bangladesh, are paid as low as \$700 a month.” Amelia Tan and Maryam Mokhtar, “Low pay may deter foreign workers” <http://www.stjobs.sg/career-resources/hr-updates/low-pay-may-deter-foreign-workers/a/100346> (downloaded on April 16, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> The CIA World Factbook reports an unemployment rate of only about 5%, but an endemic underemployment of about 40% in Bangladesh. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html> (viewed on April 17, 2013).

Bangladesh is of course far from exceptional in this regard. Studies across the global South reveal similar trends in which “more and more people are considering migration as a principal path toward improving their life chances, leading to increased emigration [even if only temporary or circular in nature] and the growth of a migration facilitating social infrastructure” [Griffith 2014: xxv; Preibisch 2014; Parrenas 2015].

### *Alamgir*

Around the same time that Karim was preparing to go abroad, yet another man, Alamgir (a pseudonym), left his home in Dhaka. He was a machine operator in a number of pharmaceutical companies, earning around 7000 taka or about 145–150 US\$ per month.<sup>34</sup> Unlike most of the workers I met, Alamgir was already in his mid-thirties when he decided to seek overseas work.

Alamgir had two elder brothers who had worked for twenty-five years and nineteen years respectively in Japan and S. Korea. Consequently, the family’s financial situation was reasonably good. However, due to a family dispute Alamgir and his wife, Nafisa<sup>35</sup>—“an educated woman” who worked as a clerk in a bank—were cut off from family support. After years of struggle, Alamgir was finally fed up and decided to seek his fortunes abroad. In his words:

I was supposed to go to Saudi Arabia. But my brother-in-law [who was in Singapore] said, “In Saudi Arab [sic] you will get only 300–350 [USD]<sup>36</sup> Why do you want to go to Saudi? Come here to Singapore.”

It seems Nafisa’s brother convinced his employer—a labour supply company<sup>37</sup>—to recruit Alamgir. Even without the involvement of an agent in Bangladesh, the trip cost him nearly “7,000 SGD” (5,000 USD).

Not surprisingly, the three stories read together point to a few important convergences. First, note that Mahmud, Karim, and Alamgir all *chose* to go abroad—they were not coerced or tricked into entering this circuit of transnational contract work. However, each of them arrived at this decision propelled by considerable economic hardship and structurally produced limited livelihood options in Bangladesh. And, migration in such contexts may be “definitionally ‘voluntary’” but is forced in reality [Kothari, 2013, 1044; Northrup, 2005]. Note, also, that while none of the three men were subjected to

<sup>34</sup> At 1999 conversion rates.

<sup>35</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>36</sup> In 1999 conversion rates.

<sup>37</sup> Supply companies, or labour supply companies recruit labour from low-income countries to work in affluent economies, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Persian Gulf.

extra-economic coercion of the kind that one tends to associate with the idea of ‘unfreedom’, each would find himself enmeshed in a complex web of dependency—financial and otherwise—with one or other of their patrons/employers for significant periods. If such lack of choice is palpable in Mahmud’s relationship of subtle bondage with his employer in Dhaka, Karim and Alamgir would both find themselves forced into complex compromises with future employers in Singapore, underwritten by the insecurity of carrying large debts.<sup>38</sup>

But the stories also reveal a few significant divergences, stemming from the somewhat different class locations from which the three men began, which shaped the subsequent course of their careers as circular migrants. Karim and Alamgir came from families that had more resources and access to at least some information about working overseas through family members already working abroad. They were, therefore, able to go to Singapore—a coveted destination for its higher wages, but largely out of reach for migrants with lesser means. In contrast, Mahmud had access to neither financial nor informational resources to speak of. This difference, coupled with the fact that he went abroad a full decade earlier, meant that Mahmud started his career in overseas work in West Asia, where both the cost of travel and the earnings are reportedly lower—only about 200–300 USD per month in 2011.<sup>39</sup> Mahmud did eventually work in Malaysia, but only after he had been to Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and had the necessary skills, experience, and savings to afford the costs involved. In this sense, Mahmud’s experience over time perhaps best exemplifies what one recent study has called, the “skills of the ‘unskilled’”—whereby “migrants with low levels of education and other forms of human capital acquire and mobilize skills across the migratory circuit” [Hagan, Hernández-León and Demonsant 2015: 202].

Finally, note that while Mahmud—as a direct and by then skilled recruit—paid practically no additional fees on his first sojourn to Iraq

<sup>38</sup> At the end of his first two-year contract, Karim, for instance, was forced to go back to Bangladesh in despair with nearly as much debt as he had left with. After several agonizing months with no prospect of affording yet an overseas trip through agents, Karim was lucky enough to be hired back by a Singaporean company where he had worked for a few months. Consequently, he felt eternally grateful to his “boss”—a Singaporean man—for having given him “a new life,” although he admitted to being underpaid routinely. Alamgir, on his part, found himself having to

fend off physical abuse from his “China [sic] boss”. And yet, because “low-skilled” work permit holders in Singapore are not allowed to change employers, he was forced to continue working for that company until his debts were paid off. Such examples are not exceptions; they constitute the rule in the world of transnational circular/managed migration across the globe.

<sup>39</sup> Migration News, vol. 20, Number 3, July 2013 [http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3851\\_o\\_3\\_o](http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3851_o_3_o) (accessed on December 13, 2013).

in the late 1980s, ten years later both Karim and Alamgir, who relied on middle men were forced to spend considerable sums for the privilege of working in Singapore. And it is to this area of the recruitment of workers, the costs of mobility and the role of the manpower industry—with its many technologies of surplus value extraction from workers—that I would like to turn to in the following section.

*Leaving: Agents, Friends, Relatives, Skills and Costs*

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in Bangladesh, the cost of going abroad in 2011 should have been no more than 85,000 Bangladeshi Taka, or about 1,150 US\$ (at 2011 conversion rates).<sup>40</sup> This included the ticket, the visa processing and other miscellaneous fees. Workers who went abroad in the 1980s report spending between 30,000 and 70,000 Taka (US\$ 386-902, in 2015 conversion rates) if they employed the help of subagents, and less if they were recruited directly by representatives of a company for their trips to the GCC countries. Early migrants to Singapore reportedly spent as little as 15-20,000 BDT—essentially the cost of the airplane ticket in those days. Even in the early 1990s, depending on the destination, a worker typically needed only about 80,000-120,000 Taka (US\$ 950-1,450) to make this journey to work abroad. Karim's brother Kashem, for instance, paid 1,20,000 BDT when he left to work in Singapore in 1992. But by the time Karim left home to work abroad for the first time in 1997, his initial cost was 180,000 BDT. Other workers I spoke to reported paying as much as 350,000-400,000 BDT or about 4,900-5,600 USD in 2007 to come to Singapore. In recent years, the cheapest destination is reportedly Oman and Dubai, requiring a mere 300,000-400,000 Bangladeshi Taka (US\$ 3,600-5,000), i.e., the equivalent of 4.1 to 5.7 years of per capita GNP in Bangladesh in 2011. For Singapore, this amount could easily be between US\$ 7000-9000. Indeed, as Mahmud Ali reported in 2011, a man from his village had paid a handsome 1,000,000 BDT or almost US\$ 12,000 to secure a “work-permit” to Singapore.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Bangladeshi migrants seem to pay some of the highest recruiting fees

<sup>40</sup> Interview with BMET and BOESL (Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd.) officials. Also, Afsar, 2009: 27.

<sup>41</sup> See also, TWC2 “Worse off for Working: Kickbacks, Intermediary Fees, and Migrant

Construction Workers in Singapore.” <http://twc2.org.sg/2012/08/12/worse-off-for-working-kickbacks-intermediary-fees-and-migrant-construction-workers-in-singapore/>

in the world.<sup>42</sup> Average cost of going abroad was about 4 times the GNI per capita in 2012.<sup>43</sup>

Even if we allow for some discrepancy in these reported amounts, clearly, travelling abroad for contract work has become increasingly expensive over the years, making it a significant mechanism of surplus appropriation from potential contract workers and their families, even before the workers enter the actual labour process—i.e. “the realm of production where the crucial relationship of capitalism (exploitation, the extraction of surplus value) is located” [Kerr 1997: 406]. So what accounts for this inordinate rise in the cost of becoming a transnational contract worker? To answer this question, we need to look closely at the process of recruitment. Let us begin with the “agent”—perhaps the most important figure in nearly every migrant’s story.<sup>44</sup>

In 1988, when Mahmud was first getting ready to go abroad, knowledge about opportunities for overseas contract work was not as widespread in Bangladesh. Consequently, the demand for labour was seemingly greater than the supply of manpower. In those days, foreign companies recruited workers directly on the basis of interviews, albeit mediated by Dhaka based agencies. Consequently, the only cost a worker incurred in preparing for his trip was the advance payment of his airfare. For Mahmud, it was 14,500 Taka, or about 290 USD.<sup>45</sup> Given his destitute background and his meager earnings, Mahmud had neither savings, nor any tangible assets to speak of against which a conventional moneylender would agree to lend him money. What he did have was a relationship of rare trust and patronage with his employer Morad Saheb, and he decided to draw on this one intangible but very real resource at this critical juncture in his life. This arrangement undoubtedly saved Mahmud from incurring an initial substantial debt with high interest rates that many workers in his shoes would find themselves in.<sup>46</sup> But borrowing from his employer in Dhaka also meant that Mahmud would forfeit his ability to decide when he could go abroad, to which country, and, most importantly, how many times and for how long.

<sup>42</sup> A recent report by the ILO notes that on an average a Bangladeshi migrant to the Gulf spends about 309,259 BDT or around 3893 USD in recruitment fees (The Cost, xi).

<sup>43</sup> According to the World Bank, the per capita GNI of Bangladesh was 950 USD in 2012. See [data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh](http://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh)

<sup>44</sup> In migrant accounts, recruitment agencies appear as ‘travels’, while ‘agent’ denote sub-agents/touts working for the “travels”.

<sup>45</sup> In 1999 exchange rates; I was unable to find a conversion rate for 1988. See <http://www.xe.com/>. The first significant devaluations of the Bangladeshi Taka since 1975 were in 2000 and 2001 [Zahid, 2001].

<sup>46</sup> In one study, nearly 90% of the respondents reported borrowing money from money lenders and other sources to finance their trip abroad [Afsar 2009: 28].

A decade later, when Karim was preparing for his first trip to Singapore in 1997, the situation had changed quite dramatically. Direct recruitment by prospective employers or companies through interviews and on the basis of demonstrable skills were still few and far between,<sup>47</sup> but by then an exponentially growing manpower-export industry had infiltrated the interiors of the country thoroughly. As a result, by the 1990s the most common avenue for a worker with limited means to go abroad was through the aegis of a sub-agent connected to a Dhaka-based recruitment agency, or if the prospective migrant already had familial or kin networks abroad through a labour supply company or migrant broker based abroad. In 2011, there were about 700 licensed recruitment agencies in Bangladesh. Working on commission for these larger agencies, were armies of sub-agents and touts. These agents help draw hundreds of thousands of young men, sometimes as young as 16-18 years of age, and often with no tangible vocational skills, directly from the rural areas into the circuits of transnational temporary contract work with the promise of “original visas” that purportedly deliver legal work permits and jobs in the host country.<sup>48</sup> More often than not, an average worker lacks proper information about the job he is being recruited for at the point of departure. Worse yet, he could find himself stranded on reaching his destination, with no work, no income, and sometimes without proper legal status. As an “Alibaba”—the term used to refer to illegal, undocumented workers—he then becomes not only a target for police atrocities in the host country, but also an object of pity, and sometimes even disdain, in the eye’s of the so-called ‘original’ migrants.

Who are these agents? In the 1980s or even in the early 1990s, a sub-agent could on occasion work his way up to become a primary agent. One study reports that sub-agents or local brokers were typically literate members of the community with some high school training. They are often returnee migrants who have overseas work experience that facilitates in convincing potential recruits, as well as assisting with a range of services such as procuring the passport and medical clearance, and mediating between the migrant and the agencies in Dhaka. In return, according to this study, the sub-agents typically received a payment of 10,000-60,000 Taka from the agency

<sup>47</sup> Afsar [2009] reported only 1 in a sample of 60 Gulf-bound workers being recruited directly by an employer.

<sup>48</sup> Sometimes this is also referred to as “bhalo or good visa” [Afsar 2009]. The term

‘original’ that the workers I interviewed used more often reflects a more complex scenario in which the issue was not if the “visa” or work-permit assured a good job, but rather whether it actually assured a job at all.

for each worker they recruited, but they did not expect any money from the migrants themselves [Afsar 2009: 18–20]. However, my interviews with workers in Singapore as well as return migrants in Bangladesh suggest a more complex picture.

Most of the men I spoke to indicated that the sub-agents' commissions were included in the initial "fees" that the workers paid. For instance, Mahmud recounts how a man he called "Nana" (maternal grandfather), organized his third sojourn abroad:

[Nana was] like a grandfather to me...He lived here, nearby... I ran into him [in Dhaka one day].

—He said: Miyan... I am sending some people [abroad], and I am falling short [of the number I am supposed to send]. Do you want to go?

—I asked: Where?

—He said: Malaysia.

—I asked: How much will it cost?

—He said: Look... in other places they pay 70,000, if you can give 60,000, you can go.

—He said: I have genuine visas, you can go "in a shortcut".

—I asked: Sure?

—He said: Sure.

As I am talking to him he said: Miyan go and do your medical tests first. If you pass... I will send you within 7 days! ... In those days it was not so easy, you know. And this man was like my Nana!

—He said: You go now! You can give me the money later!

The trust that Mahmud and his Nana shared as members of a kinship network was of course very different than what is typical of relationships between prospective migrants and their "agents," especially as the man-power export business has expanded over time. The special 10,000 taka discount that Nana offers to Mahmud must also be understood in this context of shared kinship bonds. Ten years later, when Karim sought 'special consideration' from an agent known to his family, his experience was vastly different. To quote him:

[When] I first came to Singapore [in 1997] the agent fee...was... [3,600 USD].<sup>49</sup> [And this because] ... we knew the agent. He said, "Okay... I will charge 50,000

<sup>49</sup> 1999 rates.

taka less for now.” “Less” meaning, ... a year later I would have to give him 60,000 taka.

In other words, the “agent” acted as a short-term moneylender charging a high interest rate (20%), and helping himself to a sizeable portion of Karim’s future earnings in the process.

Prospective migrants can bypass the “travels” and “agents” nexus altogether if they have close family or kin members already working abroad, who can act as a broker. For instance, Alamgir reported that his “brother-in-law got out an IPA [In Principle Approval]<sup>50</sup> from his [supply] company” in Alamgir’s name, obviating the need for agent services in Bangladesh. As sociologist Mizanur Rahman explains:

For migration to Singapore a prospective migrant needs an IPA... from the Ministry of Manpower [MOM], Singapore... issued with the name and the passport number of a prospective migrant. Recruiting agents in Singapore apply for the IPAs and they are also required to present documents showing the genuine demand for foreign manpower in different companies [2009, 84].

As it turns out, the amount Alamgir spent—S\$7000 (USD 5000)—to secure an IPA and eventually a work permit was even higher than what Karim paid to his agent in Bangladesh.

Family or kin members who are already abroad can also function as “migrant brokers” [Rahman 2009]. For instance, one young man I will call Jhantu, reported that his cousin, who owned a travel agency in Singapore, and whom Jhantu calls *bhai* (brother), arranged his trip and that he does not have to pay anything in return. But later in the conversation in response to a question about how the workers spend their leisure time, he said somewhat caustically:

Well, there are those who blow all their money here on... [useless] pursuits. But [people like me] think that *our parents sent us with everything they have*. They depend on our incomes here. Whatever we can send them is absolutely necessary at home [emphasis added].

In other words, *Bhai* may have financed the trip of this poor relation, but Jhantu’s allusion to his parents having sent him “with everything they have” suggests that the family’s meagre assets—possibly a bit of land on which betel leaf was cultivated—may have served as collateral in the transaction, tying Jhantu to the usual anxiety of unpaid debts and uncertain futures, so endemic among young workers on their first sojourn. For, large initial costs, supporting a network of parasitic middlemen that can include members of the workers’ extended

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.singapore-visa.net/in-principle-approval-letter.html> (viewed on February 3, 2014).

families, essentially means that for the first one to two years, the migrants labour for “free” since the money they earn has already been “spent,” so to say, even before their arrival at their sites of work. Nor surprisingly, the poorest and the least skilled of the workers are the ones who are exploited the most, ending up in debt traps for years.

A relatively new phenomenon in the recruiting business in Bangladesh is the “training centre” where prospective migrants purportedly get industry-specific training. On completion of such training, they receive a much-coveted certificate of “skill” that ostensibly makes it easier for them to be placed in appropriate jobs overseas. This is particularly true for those aspiring to work in Singapore, where the state’s explicit preference for the “right” type of workers—i.e. “skilled foreign workers who have the necessary academic and skill-based qualifications, [and] years of experience”<sup>51</sup>—and its policy of imposing special levies such as the foreign worker levy (FWL) on companies employing “semi-skilled” (with a specific trade qualifications), “less-skilled” (with some basic training), or “un-skilled” foreign workers puts a premium on such certification. Simply put, the lower the skill levels of the foreign workers, the higher the levy charged by the state per worker, per month.<sup>52</sup> It is, therefore, in the employers’ interest to ensure that the prospective migrants are properly certified, usually with basic skills—whether before they leave their homes or after they reach Singapore<sup>53</sup>—*irrespective* of what the jobs at hand are. As a report by the Singapore based NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) observes, employers “want to hire only skilled workers in order to save on the levy. It does not matter whether they really need the skills or if they merely want a [worker to carry] [...] screws and rivets from storage shed to site”<sup>54</sup> (TWC2, 2013, 3).

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Manpower at <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/foreign-worker-levy/skilled-worker-levy>

<sup>52</sup> In the Construction sector in Singapore, the 2015 levy rates for a “Basic Skilled” foreign worker (work permit category R2) is S\$ 550 per month, while for a worker with Higher Skills (work permit category R1), it is S\$300 per month. In the Marine and Process industries, the levies per month are similarly higher for an unskilled worker (S\$ 400 and S\$ 450 respectively) than for a skilled worker (S\$ 300). Source: ANNEX A-5: Changes to Foreign Worker Levies, Ministry of Finance, Government of Singapore ([http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget\\_2015/download/annexa5.pdf](http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2015/download/annexa5.pdf))

<sup>53</sup> Singapore also has a Skills Development Levy that requires employers to contribute a small amount of money to a fund that finances workers for further training once they are already in Singapore. [https://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/Employers/EmployerGuides/employer-guides/hiring-employees/skills-development-levy-\(sdl\)](https://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/Employers/EmployerGuides/employer-guides/hiring-employees/skills-development-levy-(sdl))

<sup>54</sup> Transient Workers Count Too. 2014. Training Centres in Bangladesh Have Become Money-Minting Machines. <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/09/22/training-centres-in-bangladesh-have-become-money-minting-machines/> (Retrieved on May 10, 2014).

The training centres in Bangladesh are supposed to impart exactly such “basic skills” to aspiring migrants. The website of the *Building and Construction Authority of Singapore*<sup>55</sup> mentions 8 authorised training centres in Bangladesh. But, in reality, there are over 100 such centres claiming to offer BCA administered training and tests (TWC2, 4). The BCA claims that these centres only offer training for the construction sector but, in fact, the centres routinely offer certificates for the marine industries as well. Mohsin Akhter is one such worker who got “skilled” through a training centre. When asked about certificates for the marine industry, he explained: “In fact the training is mainly in construction, not in shipyard work. Those who fail two or three times and are no longer able to take the exams, they go for shipyard work”.

I met Mohsin at his home in a village near Dhaka in 2011. Unlike the other workers I have mentioned so far, Mohsin, who is much younger, belongs to a generation of men whose fathers/uncles had already worked overseas. Mohsin’s family is not rich, but it is certainly considerably better-off than a few decades ago when his grandfather struggled to support the family by selling simple sugar snacks (*batasha*). The eldest son of his parents, Mohsin decided to join the Comfort-Setsco training centre established by one of the largest “manpower services” concerns in Dhaka—Penguin International Ltd.—towards the end of his high school.<sup>56</sup>

According to TWC2, the average cost of training in these centres is about S\$ 3000 or about USD 2,400 in 2013 conversion rates.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, a prospective migrant is charged the equivalent of between S\$ 40–150 (USD 31–120) per month as incidental costs, such as uniforms, food and lodging. The duration of the course is only about two and a half months, but a trainee typically has to wait an additional seven to eight months before he is able to take the test. He is, of course, obliged to pay the monthly fees for lodging and meals during these months of waiting. As a result, many aspiring workers never end up completing the course because of a reported shortage of testing slots (WC2, 10–11). Mohsin’s experiences would seem to concur. As he recalls:

[could not even get to the practical] [training phase]... On top of that if someone fails... they take 25,000 taka [USD 355 in 2007] [...] Some people fail even twice

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.bca.gov.sg/academy/Testcenters.aspx>

<sup>57</sup> In 2015 this amount would be about USD 2,114.

<sup>56</sup> <http://penguin-srci.com/overview.html> (accessed 4 January, 2016).

or thrice... [When] I first took the exam... it was a forge welding job in which you have to keep the metal [sheet] above your head and then do the welding. I completely 100% completed the job... They do an x-ray [to check the welding]... there too I was okay... And yet, from Singapore... 90 people took the exam, only 32 were given a pass, and the rest of us were failed [...] [This] was a problem... meaning the number of failures were typically high... two thirds would fail... this was the system...[It] took a long time for us to get slots for *practical* [training]. For 5-6 months we were only at the basic level...

Even after passing the examination, a newly skilled recruit is expected to pay another S\$4000 (USD 3,100) to get placed in a “skilled job” appropriate to his training with a specific company in Singapore. Thus, the total cost of getting certified as ‘skilled’ and being placed in a job in 2013 typically run to S\$ 6000-7000 (4,750-5,550 USD), which is about 4-5 years worth of the GDP/capita of Bangladesh (1,096 USD in 2010-2014 according to the World Bank).<sup>58</sup> However, for all their efforts and the considerable money they spend, there are no guarantees in this process either. For, many of the migrants find that the companies that hire them do not have the kind of jobs they were ‘trained’ for. As a result, they end up being hired out to other companies to do ‘unskilled’ work—such as carrying cement, mixing cement, or water jetting, for which the wages are also considerably lower than what they were led to expect at the onset of their training in Bangladesh. Mohsin, for instance, spent 275,000-300,000 Taka (USD 3,850-4,260 in 2007) to get a welder’s certificate from the training centre, only to be recruited by a labour supply company that had no construction projects of its own, let alone welding work.

According to TWC2’s estimates, around S\$ 240 million or USD 190 million is extracted annually from prospective migrant workers from Bangladesh through this business of training migrant workers [TWC2: 11]. This is certainly a sizeable turnover for any ‘business’. But for the purposes of our present concern with modes of surplus extraction and its implications for the status of workers, I want to foreground two issues here. First, note that the beneficiaries of the ‘training business’ are not the much-maligned small-time ‘sub-agents’, but a coalition of big entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and Singaporean companies that apparently own the official testing centres and co-own many of the unofficial ones. It is, therefore, “unquestionable”—as the TWC2 report contends—that a substantial part of the profits made from this lucrative segment of the recruitment business ends up in Singapore (TWC2, 11). Minimally, it is

<sup>58</sup> See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

clear that Singapore employers benefit substantially from lower levy rates by moving the skilling operations to Bangladesh and shifting the burden of “training costs” onto aspiring migrants—even though the jobs do not necessarily need such skills. A number of workers—both in the TWC2 study, and among my interviewees—allege that much of the initial outlay extracted from them in terms of agent/recruitment/placement fees flow as subsidies to Singapore employers to help defray the Foreign Workers’ Levy and the S\$ 5,000 security bond that the Singapore state requires employers to post for each foreign worker they hire.

In other words, both the “training centre” business and the usual ‘agent-travels’ route may be mechanisms of surplus extraction from migrant workers *already in the sphere of circulation, i.e. even before they reach their workplaces in the host societies*. It would seem that in a peculiar inversion of proverbial debt bondage practices—whereby a prospective employer extends a loan that serves as a mechanism for tying workers to his employ [Jain, 1984; Friebel and Guriev, 2006]—in contemporary circular migration “it is the worker who extends the initial loan in order to secure his own subsequent exploitation as non-citizen labour in the host country.”

Second, given the high cost involved, only families with considerable resources can afford sending their sons to training centres. In rural Bangladesh today, such resources typically come from overseas work undertaken—possibly in the Gulf—by an earlier generation of men. The surplus extracted from today’s prospective migrants to Singapore through the recruitment process is, thus, also an appropriation of surplus accumulated through the hard work of other generations within comparable contexts of tremendous exploitation. Note that such resources might have been invested instead in a bit of land or a small store in the village market to supplement the family’s income; or it could be used to properly educate the following generation. If one of the best-known adages in the field of transnational migration is that the first generation of (im)migrants must struggle so that the next can avail better livelihoods, the experiences of low-capital Bangladeshi circular/contract migrants seems to point to a labour-mobility regime that reproduces successive generations of highly productive but dispensable non-citizen workers through a bevy of illicit extractive practices that are legal and normalised within the world of transnational contract work.

*Conclusion*

This paper studies circular/managed migration—a form of guest-worker arrangement that has gained in significance worldwide since the 1980s. It emphasizes some of the modes of surplus extraction that are germane to this kind of mobility-work regimes. Drawing on original ethnographic research among Bangladeshi male migrant workers in Singapore, and return migrants from both Singapore and the Gulf in Bangladesh, the paper highlights two significant moments in the lives of circular migrants: of choosing overseas work, and of recruitment. In each moment, I have foregrounded the processes through which the men's ability to choose the conditions of their existence and work is undermined, forcing them to slide along the slippery slope between freedom and relative un-freedom—the putative endpoints of a continuum that historically determine the status of labour—toward the latter. I argue that the constraints produced by the two moments—endemic poverty and the lack of adequate livelihood options in the first, and the extraordinary surplus extraction by a sophisticated manpower export industry in the second—blur “the line between consent and coercion” and produce these men as docile non-citizen temporary contract workers—‘the perfect immigrants’—ready for yet more extraordinary surplus extraction in the host country [Hahamovitch 2015: 229; 2003]. The life stories further reveal that while the idea of the unscrupulous middleman—the “agent”—is commonplace in discussions of the transnational migration of people with limited resources anywhere, both agents and extraction can take many forms, and even employers in the host countries—Singapore, in this case—can be implicated in this process. The paper also points to the ways in which the policies of labour receiving states percolate into the lives of millions of aspiring migrant workers in the global south, defining the very contours of their dreams and disappointments, long before they arrive at an international border. As the evidence presented above shows, the boundary between free and coerced labor is indeed not defined “in abstract and timeless ways” [Stanziani 2008: 51], but, rather, realized anew through historically specific, socially embedded practices.

Recent developments within labour historiography suggest that the “history of the forms of ‘free’ labour is intimately linked to that of coerced labour” and that the two forms “were defined and practised in reference to each other” from the seventeenth right up to the

beginning of the twentieth century [Stanziani 2013: 3-5]. What is more, as historians have repeatedly pointed out, this relationality of free and coerced labor as concept and institutional practice have historically underpinned larger claims about the essential difference between a properly capitalist (read: free and liberal) West and a still feudal (read: coercive and backward) East/non-West [Wolff 1994; Guha and Spivak 1988; Stanziani 2013]. In light of these discussions, two interlinked questions suggest themselves as areas of future research. First, what might be the theoretical and historical implications of the recent resurgence of a whole spectrum of variably constrained/unfree labour forms—even well nigh enslavement<sup>59</sup> according to some—at the very heart of the capitalist West? And, second, in what ways might historians of labour, and social scientists studying the present benefit from systematically engaging each other's research? While the last question might appear to be rhetorical, it is remarkable how little by way of dialogue actually exists among labour scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds. As, I hope, the analysis above shows, inter-disciplinary engagement and collaboration has much to contribute to the field of labour studies, both in terms of approach and substantive research questions.

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<sup>59</sup> Bales and Soodalter 2010; SPLC 2013.

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## Résumé

Cet article développe une approche critique du phénomène contemporain du contrat transnational de travail faiblement qualifié comme régime de « travail invité ». Au lieu d'aborder la migration circulaire comme un instrument au service du développement ou un problème de droits de l'homme, elle est saisie ici dans le contexte plus large de débats historiques autour du statut du travail et de l'extraction d'un surplus de valeur. S'appuyant sur une recherche ethnographique conduite parmi des migrants bangladais à Singapour et des travailleurs de retour au Bangladesh, l'article explore deux moments cruciaux de la vie des migrants : celui du choix d'un contrat à l'étranger et celui du départ. Pour chaque moment il met en évidence les mécanismes qui poussent, de façon incrémentale, les migrants du travail libre vers le travail non libre.

*Mots-clés* : Transnational ; Contrat de travail ; Travail invité ; Migration circulaire ; Bangladesh ; Singapour.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag setzt sich kritisch mit dem zeitgenössischen Problem des transnationalen Arbeitsvertrags für unqualifizierte Arbeitskräfte, dem Gastarbeiterregime, auseinander. Anstatt die zirkuläre Migration als einen Beitrag zum Entwicklungsdienst oder als ein Problem der Menschenrechte zu betrachten, wird die Thematik hier in dem weitergesteckten Zusammenhang historischer Debatten bezüglich des Arbeitsstatus und dem Gewinn eines Mehrwerts diskutiert. Gestützt auf eine ethnographische Studie unter in Singapur lebenden männlichen bengalischen Migranten und nach Bangladesch zurückgekehrten Arbeitern, untersucht dieser Beitrag zwei entscheidende Momente im Leben eines Migranten: die Wahl eines ausländischen Vertrags und der Weggang. Für beide deckt er die Mechanismen auf, die schrittweise die Migranten von der freien zur unfreien Arbeit treiben.

*Schlüsselwörter* : Transnationaler; Arbeitsvertrag; Gastarbeit; Zirkuläre Migration; Bangladesch; Singapur.