

# Migrating through the Margins: *An Anthropological Perspective of Bangladeshi Migrants in India*

---

## Background

Anthropological inquiry into migration has provided a number of possible new directions including innovative ways of examining diversity discourse, urban conditions, social complexities, interwoven culture and its challenges. CARE has conducted an anthropological study of migration patterns and challenges with Bangladeshi migrants in India as part of the EMPHASIS (Enhancing Mobile Populations' Access to HIV and AIDS Information, Services and Support), a five year project funded by Big Lottery Fund and implemented by CARE in Bangladesh, India and Nepal project. The following brief is based on a small scale Anthropological Study conducted among Bangladeshi migrants in India (29 In-depth Interviews). It explores emerging themes on the challenges of living in two informal urban settlements in India known for housing Bangladeshi migrants: Wadala and Kalwa. Both settlements run along railroad tracks and were developed on property owned by the railroads.

Cross-border migration is not a new phenomenon in India. Historically, India has received immigrants from almost all neighboring countries, but in recent history the immigration from Bangladesh has raised concerns about the impact of such continuous immigration on the growth and development of states in India (Sarkar, J, 2011). In 1947 migration took place on a large scale during the partition of India and Pakistan. Massive rioting, destruction of property, and threats to life in these two countries resulted in an influx of people from both sides of the border. It was a forced migration which caused conflict induced displacement of a large population.. In 1950, it is estimated that a further one million refugees crossed into West Bengal. The 1951 Census of India recorded that 27% of Kolkata's population comprised of East Bengali refugees. Migration from East Pakistan to India continued both on an on-going basis and during periods of particular communal unrest right up to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 when it is estimated that 600,000 refugees left for India. Estimates of the number of refugees in 1970 are over 5 million in West Bengal alone (Roy,R.,2009). Another major influx came in 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. It is estimated that around 10 million East Bengali refugees entered India during the early months of the war in 1971, of which 1.5 million may have stayed back after Bangladesh became independent(SARD,2011). Following this, there has been a continuous flow of Bangladeshi migrants in different states of India. Bangladesh is a labor surplus country and it is estimated that 225,000 people leave Bangladesh every year through official channels for employment abroad (cited in Siddiqui, T.). The estimates of migration through unofficial channels are unknown. The Indian 2001 census mentions, there are approximately 3 million Bangladeshi migrants in India, represents 60% of total migrants.

---



## KEY FINDINGS

### History and Migration Experience

Poor economic conditions, lack of livelihood options and socio-cultural dynamics in Bangladesh are the major push factors behind undocumented migration from Bangladesh to India (Sultana et al., 2011). In addition to economic reasons, our research shows that many migrants may have decided to move because it is seen as a “rite of passage” in certain communities (Samuel, F et al, 2013) For Bangladeshis, official migration to India for work is not permitted, therefore most of the migrants from Bangladesh to India are unauthorized (Samuels, F et al.,2011).

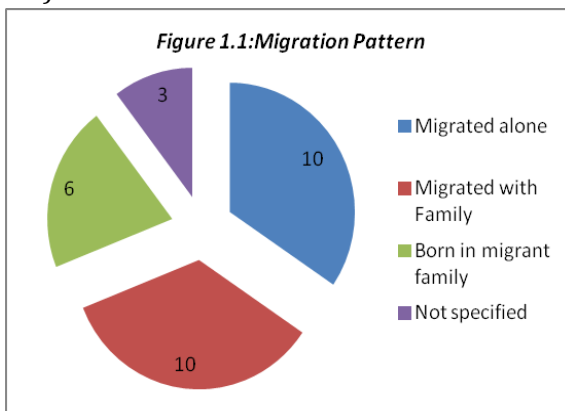
#### Making the move

*Rahimuddin is a 24 years old. He is living with his wife in Kalwa for the last seven months. They are staying in a rented house. He works as a daily laborer and his wife is a domestic worker. About 7 months ago he came to Mumbai along with his wife Soma. Rahimuddin has one sister who got married and one brother who died in a train accident. His mother suffering from kidney problems and he has taken out a loan to pay for his mother's treatment. He said “In Bangladesh it is very difficult to earn money that's why we came to India to earn money and so we can pay back the loan”.*

Majority of study respondents (23 out of 29) reported that they did not have any official immigration documents proving they migrated to India legally. Despite this, very few (6) managed to obtain some legal papers, which prove their identity as Indians.

The informants<sup>1</sup> of this study can be divided into three groups according to their migration experience. The first group came alone to Mumbai either with the help of relatives or villagers and later brought their family to join them. Sometimes they left their children in Bangladesh to continue their education. The second group came with all their primary family members. The

third group consists of children of the first or second group. They were born in Mumbai though connected to Bangladesh culturally and through familial relationships (See figure 1.1).



### Life at Destination

At destination Bangladeshi migrant faces many challenges ranging from housing arrangement, finding a job and constant struggle to cope with power structure, or sometimes even marriage is a coping strategy to settle at destination.

### Housing Challenges

The most difficult challenge reported by migrants is arranging suitable housing once

<sup>1</sup> To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of respondents no real names are used in case stories.

they arrive in India. Most respondents reported initially living on the footpaths in India where they could easily be caught by police and risk deportation. Many of the respondents started building temporary constructions on footpaths called shanties.

Three respondents reported living with other migrant workers in shared accommodations. Sometimes one person of the group acted as a group leader whose responsibilities were to manage everything related to the group residence. For these additional responsibilities he might get some exemption from living expenses. Among the respondents, 7 of them live in their own house. The Rest of the respondents rent shanties in slums. One migrant respondent built their house on disputed land, which resulted in a continuous threat of demolitions and police harassment.

#### **Finding a Home**

*Rahima is a 50 years old woman lives in Kulipada in Wadala since 2002. She has 4 daughters and 1 grandson. About 20 years ago, she came to Mumbai with her parents. Her one sister stays in Ray Road with her family. Initially around 15 years ago, she used to stay on rent at Rs 500 per month. But later on she bought the land in Kulipada for Rs. 20, 000 and constructed the house, which is 10×20 tenements, consisting only of one room. There is no separate kitchen or bedroom. She does not go to work as she is getting older. She takes care of the household chores. Since 2002 she has stayed in the same community but moved to different parts. Some years ago she was working as a domestic maid.*

Only 2 out of 29 respondents have no complaints with their utilities. The remaining 27 respondents have problems accessing all basic utilities at their house. Seven respondents mentioned inadequate supplies of water, no access to potable water, and difficulties accessing legal electricity connections or toilets. Most of the informants mentioned the insecure condition of the area where they live. Additionally some respondents reported

that they have to pay high prices for these inadequate services: Rahima said, "*few months back I had to pay RS 600 for for an illegal electric connection from the adjacent building*".

These areas are vulnerable to theft; crime and sexual harassment and violence. Despite of fewer facilities, the migrant people had to live in these areas, as they have not enough money and legal papers to live in a better place.

#### **Occupation**

Respondents held various jobs and occupations upon settling in India. Female respondents

#### **Finding work**

*Sahida came to in India in 2002. She faced many problems in the Mumbai primarily due to lack of Hindi language skills. She lost her job many times and earned very low wages. Slowly she picked up the local language and managed to get a work a domestic help.*

most commonly reported domestic service as their occupation. Most male respondents reported being daily laborers. Incomes range from Rs.150 to Rs.300 per day. Few respondents reported receiving a weekly or monthly salary and one respondent reported begging as a way to generate income. Study participants said that new comers had to struggle to find work and eventually getting settled and established in India. It often takes time and can be difficult.

Most respondents mentioned they initially faced difficulties finding work because they were unable to communicate adequately in Hindi.

Some female respondents reported dancing in bars citing it as an easy way to earn better income in terms of amount of money. Some respondents wanted to return to this occupation because the wages were better though faced stigma because bar dancing is not

considered a respectable profession for women. Across the board, female respondents often spoke of the security challenges facing female migrants in India. Many reported experiencing violence, sexual harassment and concerns over their safety both at work and at home. Two female respondents reported being sold to pimps for prostitution and one woman reported being raped repeatedly by the man of the house where she worked as a domestic servant for three years.

According to the data, one respondent sold marijuana to generate income. He bribed police on a monthly basis to continue and develop his illegal business.

Some study participants also reported that one way migrants can generate additional income is by renting shanties to other illegal migrants. One respondent said that she and her husband settled on the footpath of Lalmati and gradually built more shanties beside their house. They started to rent out their additional settlements for Rs. 2000 a month.

### Navigating Power Structures

The threats of deportation and jail are a constant stress on undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in India. Over the course of the study almost all respondents mentioned this as a daily obstacle and challenge. Respondents repeatedly expressed their fear and anxiety due to the threat of police harassment or imprisonment.

Despite this, only one respondent reported actually being jailed and deported. After a year, he returned to Mumbai again illegally. The police caught one respondent but she managed to escape arrest by paying bribes to police with the help of a male friend who later became her husband. In the course of speaking to respondents, many reported that there are networks of influential community members who can protect them during police raids. They often view these individuals as people who can advocate for them and are powerful community members.

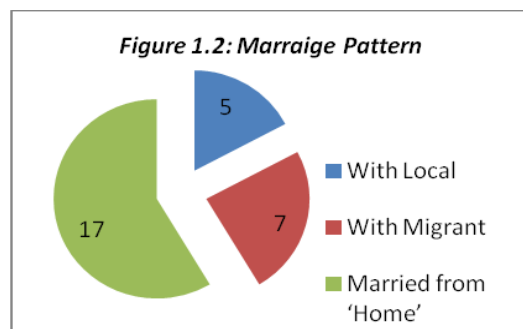
#### Power Plays

*Sahida, mentioned a committee in the community where she lived. This committee is highly influential and controlled by two local leaders. These two community leaders prove to be very helpful when there are demolition drives or raids. When community members approach them for proof of identity, they use their networks and speak to the officials.*

Respondents who were able to obtain legal proof of their identity reported feeling far more secure. Identity cards, pan cards or ration cards were cited as valuable possessions for migrants in India. Participants often explained that the longer one lives in India the easier it is to obtain legal documentation. However, for newcomers, establishing any legal documentation is extremely challenging. Six

respondents of the total sample reported having some sort of legal proof of identity. Most were able to acquire this documentation by illegal means such as bribing local officials and leveraging influential community members.

Figure 1.2: Marriage Pattern



### Marriage Patterns

Five out of 29 respondents reported marrying local Indians after migrating. The rest of the respondents either married other migrants at destination or were married in Bangladesh prior to migrating. Divorce and multiple

marriages also occur among many of the migrants interviewed. Sometimes domestic violence led to divorce or a women's remarriage. Two respondents reported getting married in their homeland but separating and then re-marrying local residents once arriving in India. Marriage often takes place as a means of establishing some security (see figure 1.2).

### Health Services and Priorities

Most respondents visit private doctors to access treatment and health services. Respondents repeatedly spoke about avoiding government hospitals and public health services for several reasons including the high volume of patients and long queues. Most respondents depend on daily wages and cannot afford to take time off to visit government facilities. Additionally, some respondents mentioned that doctors of government hospitals often refer them to a diagnosis center to get clinical tests, which requires spending additional time and money. Most participants said government hospitals were far from where they lived making it difficult to access services.

#### Health Matters

*Mohammad is 24 years old, was born and brought up in the slum community Mahatma Gandhi nagar in Wadala. He works as a cable worker and his mother is a domestic worker. His wife stays at home to look after the kids. He recently tested positive for HIV in a private hospital. He has not started ART yet but has received counseling and demonstrated knowledge of HIV and AIDS.*

Findings indicate that participants prefer private practices because of the ease of getting an appointment and more centralized care. Two respondents bought or tried to get medicine from Bangladesh as the cost of medicines are higher in Mumbai.

Only 4 respondents reported having an awareness of HIV and AIDS and among them one respondent was diagnosed as HIV positive.

### Conclusion

The major focus of this study was to explore the experience of Bangladeshi migrants in India. The case studies were an attempt to grasp a nuanced and detailed view of the situation in terms of employment, health, and potential vulnerabilities to HIV and STD. Over the course of interviewing respondents it was evident that very few respondents were comfortable disclosing their Bangladeshi identity. Two of the respondents completely denied their Bangladeshi heritage. In those cases neighbors and other respondents confirmed them as migrants. This highlights some of the vulnerabilities Bangladeshi migrants in India may face. Additionally, the occupational pattern of respondents portrayed their fragile economic conditions. Interviews showed that most of the adult household members work. Sometimes even children work as domestic servants to meet household needs.

Women are more vulnerable as migrants. Female respondents repeatedly spoke about being forced into sex work or experiencing sexual harassment and rape. The lack of education, language and skills meant that most respondents worked as daily laborers. Almost all respondents reported a persistent fear of police raids and harassment and a general feeling of insecurity.

Few migrants managed to access government issued ration cards or legal documentation. Respondents reported not being able to access government health services as well as an inability to afford the cost of medication.

Overall, very little support exists for this community. Local politically powered people sometimes acted as informal support groups, but very little formal or structured services have been established. Most respondents want legal citizenship so they can access services and no longer experience the fear of police raids and deportation. The lack of local support systems for this migrant community also shows the lack of political interest in the community. Police and others consider migrant settlements as a concentration of crime and illegal activity. Even migrant residents do not feel secure in their own community. Local support groups outreach and health systems are needed to improve conditions and provide viable services to this community.

### References

Samuels, F. and Wagle, S (2011) *Population mobility and HIV and AIDS: review of laws, policies and treaties between Bangladesh, Nepal and India*. ODI Background Note. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Samuels, F., Nino-Zarazua, M., Wagle, S., Sultana, T. and Sultana, M. (2011) *Vulnerabilities of movement cross-border mobility between India Nepal and Bangladesh*. ODI Background Note. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Samuels, F., Wagle, S., Sultana, T., Sultana, M., Kaur, N., and Chatterjee, S. (2012) *Stories of harassment, violence and discrimination: migrant experiences between India, Nepal and Bangladesh*. ODI Project Briefing, No. 70.

Sultana, T., Das, A., Sultana, M., Samuels, F., and Nino-Zarazua, M. (2011) 'EMPHASIS baseline: Vulnerability to HIV&AIDS: A Social research on cross-border mobile populations from Bangladesh to India'. Dhaka: Care Bangladesh.

Roy Rituparna.: *the hungry tied, Bengali Hindu refugees in the Subcontinent: IIAS Fellow, the Newsletter, No. 51, summer 2009.*

South Asian Research and Development Initiative: *Deconstructing Migrant Workers Vulnerabilities to HIV and AIDS in South Asia: November 17, 2011*

### Web resources

Sarkar J.: *Bangladeshi Migration to West Bengal :a cause of concern*, Retrieved <http://www.capabilityapproach.com/pubs/Iyoti%20Sarkar.pdf> accessed on 20/08/2013

Siddiqui, T.: *Mobility Patterns and HIV vulnerability in Bangladesh*, Retrieved from [http://www.samren.net/Research\\_Papers/doc/BangladeshHIV\\_KL\\_%2020%20Nov.pdf](http://www.samren.net/Research_Papers/doc/BangladeshHIV_KL_%2020%20Nov.pdf) on 23/08/2013

### Note

The brief is based on a small scale qualitative study titled " Anthropological Study conducted among Bangladeshi migrants in India"-as part of EMPHASIS (Enhancing Mobile Populations' Access to HIV and AIDS Services, Information and Support) project.