

CHAPTER SIX

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF MIGRANTS IN SINGAPORE

Introduction

A field of inquiry that has been relatively neglected by the migration scholars is that of the circumstances in which migrant workers work and live. Even if scholars have become more aware of the often precarious circumstances in which the migrants find themselves while on foreign soil, hardly any systematic research has been done on this topic and subsequently hardly any data exist which can help to form a good picture of the migrant's life in the host country. Acquiring more knowledge on this subject has become highly desirable for the detailed understanding of the problems and prospects of temporary migrants in the receiving country. Considering the void in knowledge about the social life of migrants in host country, this chapter documents the experiences of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore. The primary data comes from the in-depth interviews of migrants in Singapore conducted in the second half of 2000 through the face-to-face interviews¹.

¹ A detailed description of methodology has been given in Chapter One

Bangladeshi Migrants: Socio-Demographic Profiles

Migrants are generally young in age composition. 75.39 per cent of migrants are below 30 years in my sample (Table 6.1). This is not however, surprising because migrant workers everywhere tend to be younger and studies throughout the world have found that young persons predominate among the migrants (Karim et al. 1999; Rudinick, 1996; Lie 1994; Massey et al., 1987). Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore are usually educated. Only 1.59 per cent was illiterate while 76.98 per cent had more than six years of certified schooling (Table 6.1). 7 per cent of migrants had between 14 years and 16 years certified schooling as well. The literacy rate in Bangladesh is 56 percents (in total population) and literacy rate for male is 63 percents and female 49 percents (2000 Est.)². Thus, the educational qualification of the migrants suggests that a high proportion of educated population is migrating for overseas employment compared to the national aggregate³. Migration of considerably educated persons does not necessarily indicate the demand in receiving countries for literate foreign labor. In-depth interviews suggest a relationship between level of educational acquirement and perception of educational status-consistent working environment in Bangladesh that significantly provokes the motivation for migration⁴.

² The definition of literacy rate estimation is age 15 and over can read and write. This is a CIA World Fact Book report. Web site <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bg.html>

³ This goes in the line with the prediction made by Reginald Appleyard (1998:3) about Bangladeshi migration “A major employment issue in the 1990s will be the productive employment of millions of educated persons who will join the informal and agricultural workforce each year, or join the lengthening queue of potential emigrants’.

⁴ A detailed explanation will be presented in Chapter Seven

Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim country. The national figure for Muslim and Hindu population is 83 and 16 per cents respectively (1998)⁵. The percentages of Muslim and Hindu migrants in my sample were 86.50 and 13.49 respectively (Table 6.1). This indicates that emigration opportunity has remained open to all irrespective of religious affiliation. Hindu and Muslim migrants in Singapore work together, sleep together and even eat together. The bulk of the migrants were unmarried (69.04 per cent). Extending family pattern is predominant in the rural Bangladesh. Most of the migrants were from extended families (89.68 per cent)⁶. The dominance of migration from extended family is not surprising, if we look at the social capital that extended family is relatively endowed with in the Bangladeshi society. Extended family can influence the propensity to migrate in several ways. For instances, extended family has the privilege to finance the huge financial cost of migration and to take care of the migrant's family in his absence⁷.

Most of the migrants' families were big in size (Table 6.1)⁸. 69.47 per cent of the migrants' families had five or more than five members at the time of interviews (national

⁵ CIA World Fact Book, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bg.html>

⁶ Extending family is categorized on the basis of the depth of generation. If a family consists of more than 2 generations, that family is categorized as extended family.

⁷ For example, some families with old man (father or grandfather) as the heads of families do not need mortgage for borrowing loan from money lenders because of the families' long earned reputation in the community. These families are in a better position to finance migration cost. Thus, they can draw the fruit of social capital relatively convenient way.

⁸ Data include the members of family who were having food cooked at the same hearth at the time of interview. Therefore, married sisters and brothers who were living separately have been excluded from the data.

average, 5.6, 1991 Census⁹). The study examines the position of male migrant members in the age structure of family as we know that in Indian subcontinent context usually first son of the family stays at home while younger sons are preferred to send out for work. The finding reveals an opposite trend. The higher incidence of migration from the category of first son and other sons in descending order are found, for example, 33.91, 24.34, and 20.86 per cents for first, second and third sons respectively (Table 6.1). The reason behind the higher incidence of migration of first son is most probably due to the evolution of chain migration (see, MacDonald, and MacDonald, 1974) in some migration specific districts in Bangladesh. The chain migration operates usually on the seniority basis in Bangladesh as it would be a shame for the elder persons if they are assisted and funded by the younger persons from the same family or close relatives. Thus, notion of prestige and shame comes to play a predominant role in the migration selectivity.

Bangladesh is predominantly a rural country. Around 80 per cent of population lives in villages. The bulk of the migrant workers came from the rural background (84.13 per cent; Table 6.1). Thus, labor migration to Singapore has remained predominantly as a rural phenomenon in Bangladesh. There are 64 districts in Bangladesh. However, a few districts contribute to the bulk of the migration population in Singapore (Table 6.1). These few districts are described in this thesis as ‘migration-specific districts’. The district-wise representation could be different if the sample size were larger¹⁰. Occupation is a status

⁹ Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 1999:3

¹⁰ Although data indicate that it is the Dhaka district which has contributed much of the Bangladeshi migrant population in Singapore. If sample size were large, the result could be different. From the informal talk with many workers and extensive observation in Singapore, it can be concluded

symbol everywhere in the world. What one does for the living determines largely his social and economic position in the community structure. In rural Bangladesh, the self-employment is prestigious for some families while wage-employment is not. Taking status issue into consideration, the thesis inquires occupational pursuits in terms of self-employment and wage employment. Major findings reveal that migrants prior to migration and migrants' families at the time of interview were largely unemployed and self-employed (Table 6.1).

An attempt is made to see the incidences of international migration at migrants' families. Finding unearths a trend what Mines (1981) termed as 'community tradition of migration', Wiest (1973) as "culture of dependency", Massey et al. (1987) as "social process of international migration" and MacDonald and MacDonald (1974) as 'chain migration' wherein migration from a family, kin or community induces father migration. Major finding indicates that 28 per cent of migrant families had two international migrant members while 14.28 per cent had three members (Table 6.1). The rate of repeat migration is 6.35 per cents.

All the migrants in sample did not migrate to Singapore in the same year. The arrival dates of migrants started even from 1993 (Table 6.2). The major finding shows that 35.7 per cents came to Singapore between 1993 and 1997. The opportunity of working in Singapore for longer period consecutively leads to the higher financial benefits for migrants. They are in a better position to reap the benefits of temporary migration as well. This trend can be

that Dhaka, Munshiganj, Tangail, Comilla, and Mymensingh are the major Singapore manpower sending districts in Bangladesh.

seen in the amount of monthly incomes and the volume of remittances later in this chapter. Bangladesh is a flood-prone country. Flooding is a recurring phenomenon. The thesis examines how far flood directly affects the migrants' families¹¹. Major finding reveals that 74.60 per cent of migrants were directly affected by the devastating flood in 1998 which inundated two-thirds of the country. However, this thesis does not regard international migration as a flood-induced phenomenon because of the higher financial cost of migration. In addition, migration-prone districts are not necessarily districts affected by recurrent flood.

Singapore as a Costly Migration Destination

The road to Singapore is neither trouble-free nor accessible to all. After the payment of financial cost of migration, a considerable amount of time prospective migrants had to wait at home before migrating to Singapore. This has been also shown in Chapter Four. The processing time for migration is variable depending mainly on the middlemen (Table 6.3). 50 per cent of migrants waited less than three months while 10.31 per cent of migrants waited even more than twelve months. Major findings reveal that 45 per cent of migrants spent between 190,000 and 220,000 Taka for migration to Singapore (Table 6.3). This vast amount of cash money is not easily procurable for rural families who are mostly from the

¹¹ By 'directly affected by flood', the thesis means those families whose agricultural land, families or other socio-economic activities encountered direct effect of flood.

subsistence economy. The procurement often involves the mortgage of the families' economies¹² for uncertain period (see Appendix-6-1).

A detailed fragmentation of sources of arrangement of financial cost of migration informs that 53, 43, and 37 percent of migrants collected their financial cost of migration from family/personal savings, foreign remittances, and relatives respectively (Table 6.3). Selling or mortgaging land and loan from money-lenders comprise 17 and 16 per cents respectively. However, if we look at the percentages of cash money that different sources contributed to the arrangement of total financial cost of migration, the figure will be much more striking. 30, 32, and 19 percents of total financial cost of migration came from family/personal savings, remittances, and relatives respectively (Table 6.3). We can see that foreign remittances play a vital role in meeting the cost of migration. However, this is not surprising if we look at the socio-cultural aspect of Bangladeshi society where kinship network acts as a social insurance.

Uses of Time

Bangladeshi labor migrants can be termed as 'target savers' in that they try to earn as much money as possible in short periods of time in order to realize their goals, implying a preference for working overtime. This section reveals how many hours a migrant spends for

¹² Most of the migrants' families collect their financial cost of migration from selling or mortgaging land, borrowing from money lenders or relatives with substantial interest rate or even selling livestock or other forms of savings (e.g. gold). These sources of raising funds for migration usually entail mortgage of families' economies.

work on a working day and a weekly holiday - Sunday (24 hours¹³). It also offers some plausible explanations to inform how the rest of the day a migrant spends (in addition to working hours). Foreign workers are better known to the employers in Singapore as diligent and obedient workers¹⁴. Migrants who live at dormitories largely get up approximately between 5.00 and 5.30 am on working days. They spend around 30 to 45 minutes for morning work (washing face, toilet, bath etc.). Since toilet and bathroom facilities are scarcely limited in some dormitories, many migrants usually wake up much earlier to get these facilities. Migrants usually go for work by company's lorry. The normal working time is from 8 am to 5 pm with one hour lunch break and one or two tea breaks (20 minutes each).

A detailed interview is presented below to offer a general picture of living and working environment of a Bangladeshi migrant in Singapore.

Case Study: Tofazzal Shekh (not real name) was 29. He came to Singapore in 1999. He was working as an unskilled work with a construction company. He was living with around 30 to 35 workers in a dormitory at Geylang Area. They had 3 toilets, 2 bath rooms, and no specific

¹³ By a day, the thesis means 24 hours. In an attempt to calculate last one week's working hours, I found that migrants cannot remember the exact working hours for the whole week. As a result, I gave up the idea of calculating weekly working hours. I looked into the working hour for one day, that is, for the last working day. Some migrants work on weekly holiday as well. The working hour for the last Sunday is also collected for the better projection.

¹⁴ It is often seen in the '*The Strait Times*' (Singapore's main news thesis) that foreign workers are described as diligent and obedient. For instance, see *The Straits Times*, "Migrants Work Harder, Earn More", 27 January, 2001; "Heroes Honored for Saving Lives in Fire", 9 August, 2001; "Low Pay Still They Work Hard", July 19, 2001; "Explaining the Circle of Cosmopolitanism", May 14, 2001.

kitchen even though they cook regularly. He got up at around 5.30 am yesterday morning. It took another around 45 minutes to finish toilet and bath. His lorry came at 6:30 am. He reached worksite at around 7:15 am. He started working after singing at 7:30 am. He got lunch time for one hour with two tea breaks lasting total 40 minutes. He worked until 8 pm with 3 hour overtime (OT). He returned home at around 9 pm. After coming home, he along with other three friends prepared food for night and next day's lunch. He took food at around 10:45 pm and slept at approximately 11.30 pm. He watched part of a Hindi movie on Video last night. He planned to watch the rest of the movie this night (interviewing night) and, if not possible, then he would watch it in the week end. He visited Little India on last Sunday and stayed there for approximately 4 hours (6 pm to 10 pm). He came back with weekly shopping from a Bangladeshi shop at Little India.

Migrants who live at worksites do not require waking up very early in the morning. They can save the commuting time as well. Migrants usually get time to cook once in a day after work in the evening. They take the leftover for the next day's mid-day meal. If there is one thing that distinguishes these migrant workers from the locals, it is that they are used to working overtime. Motahar Hossain (32) pointed out that for the past two years and two months that he has been working here, almost everyday, except for Sundays, ends at seven o'clock or later at night, and sometimes even at three or four o'clock in the morning. A week with three, four and even six days of overtime (OT) is also not uncommon among the respondents. In fact, most of them, particularly the daily wageworkers¹⁵, have since rationalized the extra time they put means that they will be able to earn more money. The

¹⁵ Some of the workers are paid on the basis of daily working hours while others are paid monthly basis and working hour is fixed. Daily wage-workers have privileges here. Monday to Saturday - full working hour and Sunday is holiday for daily wage-workers.

benefit of being a daily wageworker is that he can maximize his wages by working overtime.

Overtime payment is usually 1.5 times the normal basic rate, that is, around from \$ 1.5 to 3 for every hour. Tazu Molla sums it up, “more OT means more money”, and thus the more money they can get to remit to their families. Migrants are found inquiring about the economic condition of other migrants by asking briefly “do you have OT?” The major finding on the working hours reveals that migrants are working between 9 and 18 hours in a day (Table 6.4). The bulk of the migrants, that is, 67 per cent of migrants spent between 13 and 18 hours for work. The motivation for working long hour comes from the migrants’ side as they are desperate to earn more money within the specific contract period. The data on the uses of time for obligatory work include commuting time as well. Commuting time for work does not vary largely. The highest commuting time reported is 2 hours in total for both ways (one hour + one hour).

Some companies do not offer overtime work opportunity on Sundays. If a company invites for work on Sundays, migrants hardly turn down the offer. The data on the working hours for the last Sunday is fascinating. The major findings reveal that 61 percent of the migrants spent between 8 to 14 hours for work. The remaining 39 per cent did not work (Table 6.4). Indeed, the migrants who did not work on last Sunday had largely no work. Sunday’s work is considered as overtime work and paid accordingly. Migrants who worked on Sundays informed that they wanted to make best use of Sundays by working rather than staying at home. Usually, Bangladeshi migrant workers gather at Little India on every Sunday evening. Working on Sundays does not hamper their visit to Little India. From

Sunday working hour data, it is evidenced that 98 per cent of migrants kept their working-hour schedule flexible enough to attend the Sunday evening-gathering at Little India¹⁶.

Incomes

There are two variables that can considerably influence the migrant workers' earnings- type of employer (direct employer or supplier) and status of migrant (skilled or unskilled). Direct employers import the workers and employ them under their direct supervisions. Indirect employers are actually labor-suppliers. They supply foreign workers to different companies. The companies who hire foreign workers from these labor suppliers are mainly users of foreign workers. They can stop hiring them with short notice. If these companies stop hiring foreign workers, suppliers find it difficult to employ them immediately elsewhere and to pay the levy monthly (SD\$ 470 for unskilled construction worker per month). Defaulter of levy payment leads to the cancellation of workpermit and forceful deportation (for three consecutive months). Data suggest that 62 per cent of migrants came under direct employers while 38 per cent came under labor-suppliers.

The bulk of the migrants came to Singapore at first as unskilled migrants. Later through the skill promotion test in Singapore, many of these migrant workers got their status upgraded. This skill promotion test is a positive initiative taken by the government of

¹⁶ Little India is a place in Singapore where most of the Bangladesh migrants gather on Sundays. This will be further elaborated in the section "Bangladeshi Migrants: Leisure Activities".

Singapore to offer better earning opportunities to the foreign workers. Migrants do not need to go back home for skill promotion test or issuing of new work permit (R-1). This test is conducted in Singapore and on the basis of result of the test; migrants are also issued skill certificates. The special benefits involved in skill promotion are higher length of stay (up to 10 years while unskilled migrants can stay up to 4 years subject to availability of work) and better wage payment as levy for skilled workers are only \$30 per month. Findings reveal that 91 per cent of migrants were unskilled when they came first to Singapore (Table 6.5). At present, 52 per cent of migrants are unskilled migrants (Table 6.5).

Some migrants work under the monthly payment scheme and they are paid monthly. However, the majority of the migrants in construction sector work under daily wage scheme. The basic wage per day immensely influences the monthly wage for each migrant. The finding for basic wage patterns of migrants is presented in a comparative fashion – past wage patterns and present wage patterns¹⁷ (Table 6.6). The data reflect a substantiate increase of basic wage over the time. With regard to the monthly income, migrants are found drawing a handsome amount of money¹⁸ (Table 6.7). The ranges of wage vary from SG\$ 250 to above 1150. Besides overtime work, migrants' skill composition and position in the company (supervisor / foreman) are contributing to this gulf of difference. The average wage that a worker received in the last month is lucrative and this figure goes higher than

¹⁷ Few kind hearted employers are found paying higher basic wage to unskilled migrants because of their experiences also. As a result, the thesis did not make the direct distinction between basic wage patterns of skilled and unskilled migrants in the Table. Rather it is put 'previous wage and present wage' to avoid the confusion.

¹⁸ At the time of interviews, migrants were asked about the total wage for the last two months. Later one month wage was averaged for the presentation purpose. The information on the last two months wage was asked for drawing a more reliable income figure.

the frequent media reporting¹⁹ or the findings of the previous researchers (discussed below). The average wage of a migrant is estimated approximately SG\$ 712²⁰.

Lee Hung Tong Henry (1999) in his study of Singapore's foreign workers reports that the majority of workers from nontraditional sources (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) earn between SG\$ 500 to 600 per month. Another study done by Cwee Sin Siew (1986) on foreign workers in Singapore reports that 60 per cent of workers earn between S\$ 501 to 750 per month and 30 per cent earn between SG\$ 751-1000. While 56 per cent of workers in her sample had below SG\$ 15 per day wage, 40 per cent had SG\$ 15 to 20. These workers were all daily rated. Both the cases migrants were mainly from Indian Subcontinent. The studies suggest that the wage of migrant workers did not change much over the period of 15 years. However, when the amount of wage is seen from the native country perspective like Bangladesh which underwent a remarkable currency devaluation for the last few years (in 1995, SG\$ 1 = BDT 27 while in 2002 it is BDT 33 approximately), migrants find a substantial increase of income over time.

Some migrants are found working irregularly. They do not have permanent work. They were mainly under 'labor suppliers'. The unofficial rule for wage payment is if a migrant worker does not have work, employers mainly, labor suppliers, will not pay him. However, employers are bound to pay levy for this period of unemployment. For migrants

¹⁹ On average, a foreign construction worker earns about \$400 per month. If he is Malaysian, he gets about \$900; \$1,300 if he is Singaporean - "New Curbs on Unskilled Workers to Start in June", 14th March 2002, *The Straits Times*, Singapore.

²⁰ This average monthly wage is estimated from the total wage for the last two months.

from Non-Traditional Source (NTS), foreign worker levy charge begins one day after their arrival in Singapore and continues until the work permit is cancelled. Major findings reveal that 76.97 per cent of migrants worked for all the year round. Some complaints are heard about the irregular payment of wage. However, the data reveal that most of the migrants had regular payment. 86 per cents of migrants received regular payment from their employers while the remaining 14 and 1 per cents had irregular and very irregular payment respectively.

Patterns of Expenditure

This section shows the expenditure patters of Bangladeshi migrants in the both places- receiving and sending counties²¹. At first, the thesis looks at the various tentative areas and total amount of expenses of income. Later, an attempt is made to quantify the total volume of remittances migrants already remitted back home and then to identify the areas of expenditure of remittances in Bangladesh from the migrant's point of view. Considering the present remittance behavior, the thesis also inquires the intended areas of uses of remittances as well. Although a section of migrants is found spendthrift, the vast majority is parsimonious in their expenditure of income in Singapore. Accommodation is generally free of cost for foreign workers. Since food is the most basic of their necessities, it is not surprising that a substantial proportion of their wages is allocated to it. Aggregate findings

²¹ The patter of expenditure of remittances in Bangladesh is explored from the migrant worker's perspective.

reveal that 69.04 per cent of migrants spent below S\$ 250 monthly for food, transport, smoking, and pocket expenses (Table 6.8).

Among other regular areas of expenses, buying lottery is very popular among the Bangladeshis. From the very beginning of their arrival in Singapore, many of the migrants started buying lotteries regularly and they aspire to keep on buying it as long as they are in Singapore. The data reveal that 50 per cent of migrants bought different types of lotteries in the last month (Table 6.8). These lotteries have usually several draws in a week²². Among this 50 percent of migrants, 16 percent spent above SG\$ 60 for lottery. In future, 51 per cent of migrants want to keep on buying lottery regularly while 11 per cent is not sure whether they will buy lottery regularly or not. One tempting reason for buying lottery is most probably its frequencies of draw dates. The lotteries are drawn several times in a week and the buyers can check the winning numbers immediately. Buyers are losing a small amount of money in a month while this amount of cash money attempts to change their fortune approximately 8 to 12 times in a month offering a possibility of winning even more than one million dollar.

Temporary migration does not imply a disarticulation between migrant and the families back in Bangladesh. Migrants keep contact with home through letters or phone calls. Migrants, whose family members are within the reach of telecommunication or whose

²² This is the last month expenditure on lottery. The migrants who did not buy lottery in last month have been excluded from the interviews. TOTO and 4D (lotteries) that the workers buy are drawn twice and thrice in a week respectively. In Bangladesh, lottery is not popular. Some philanthropic institutions organize the lotteries and lotteries are usually draws annually.

houses are near the Thana cities, make phone calls frequently to contact their families²³. Migrants spend a good amount of money on international phone calls to demonstrate their obedience to the families. The manifest function of the international calls is that it reintroduces migrant families to the communities of origin as possibly prestigious families. Everyone in the *Bari* (a group of families) comes to know about this IDD call. Besides, people outside their villages come to recognize them as migrant families. Previously unknown or little known families thus reintroduces themselves as ‘Singapori families’ in the wider local community. Major findings show that 29 percent of migrants spent more than \$40 for international phone calls (Table 6.8). 18 per cent did not spend money on phone calls in the last month. Indeed, families of these migrants were mostly out of the reach of telecommunication.

How much could a migrant save monthly? Except for a few cases of misuse of earnings, the bulk of the migrants managed to save a good amount of cash / money (Table 6.7). The major findings show that 76 per cent of migrants saved more than SG\$ 301 (above SG\$ 1150.50) in the last month. Remittance remains at the center of debate in the international labor migration. The study attempts to quantify the amount of money migrants have already remitted to Bangladesh and to identify the major areas of expenditure in Bangladesh. The major findings on the volume of remittances show that 66 per cent of migrants remitted more than their financial cost of migration (SG\$ 7,000) (Table 6.9).

²³ Since most of the migrants are from rural areas. They do not have land pone. Recent revolution of telecommunication in Bangladesh, especially mobile communication, has increased the opportunity for telecommunication with their families in Bangladesh. Besides, most of the cases members of the families visit near by cities to receive the phone calls.

However, 34 percent of migrants could not remit their financial cost of migration yet. In deed, they are new-comers and they still have time to remit (34 per cent came between 6 and approximately 12 or 18 months). The credit for remitting this vast amount of cash must go to their intention for hard labor.

To identify the areas of expenses of remittances, the study looks at the expenditure behavior in two ways – ‘areas of already used remittances’ and ‘areas of intended uses of remittances’. The data on ‘the areas of already used remittances’ show that the remittances are used mainly for the basic consumption²⁴, debt repayment, house-making and land-purchasing (Table 6.10). Major findings are that 75 per cent of migrants’ families used remittances for basic consumption and 45.08 per cent spent for debt repayment. With regard to the ‘intended areas of expenditure of remittances’, the data present a consistency with the ‘already used areas of remittances’ (Table 6.10). Major findings reveal that 82 per cent of migrants are going to use remittances for basic consumption. With regard to the role of remittances for families’ basic need, 40 per cent of migrants’ families depended primarily and 45 per cent did secondarily on remittances for their basic consumption (Table- 11). Thus, the future use of remittances is also much more centered on the family’s consumption purposes rather than production.

²⁴ By ‘basic consumption’, the thesis means families’ food, clothes and other essential maintenances necessary for subsistence living.

Bangladeshi migrants spend a large amount of income for honor goods²⁵. Major findings reveal that 65 per cent of migrants spent earnings on gold-purchasing (Table 6.11). With regard to the 'intended uses of amount of money on honor goods', 65 per cent of migrants hope to spend cash money ranging between one-fourth (Taka 50,000) and the full cost of migration (Taka 200,000) before leaving for Bangladesh (Table 6.11). One major aspect of this noneconomic form of investment may be discerned. It is status related, examples of which have already been given. Issues of status and the desire to be part of a modern life-style – that is, being able to display its symbols – are always inseparably linked to any kind of remittance spending. Often it is because of the very fact that someone has been abroad to one of the rich countries in Asia that a person has got acquainted with the 'wide world', with the manners and habits of a foreign people, with the knowledge of how to behave in an airport or friends and relatives in the community of origin, which bestows on this person a higher status. These non-economic forms and impacts of remittance usage are also of particular interest when it comes to the purchase of the so-called modern mass-produced consumer durables. Outsiders to the village, whether development planners or social researchers, often denounce them as purely consumptive or as a waste. However, the use of such appliances has to be more closely observed because they may often be used for purposes quite different from those which the manufacturers have anticipated²⁶.

²⁵ By 'honor goods' the study means those goods that have visible impact for status claims in rural Bangladesh.

²⁶ A detailed discussion on the socio-cultural aspects of the spending of remittances is presented in Chapter Eight.

Leisure Activities

What is leisure? What are the leisure activities? These are some questions that are at the center of debate in leisure studies. According to Young and Willmott (1973), any attempt to describe and measure leisure activities is like attempting to grab a jellyfish with bare hands because leisure has different meanings in different societies and to different people. Some would define leisure quite exclusively. The study uses an ordinary view for describing leisure time activities: leisure²⁷ is activity chosen in relative freedom for its qualities of satisfaction (Kelly, 1990:7). There is a growing emphasis from the Singapore side to make workers life an enjoyable and memorable one²⁸. Recently some projects like recreational clubs for foreign workers have been undertaken²⁹ to offer better recreational facilities to the foreign workers. Although a little time is left for leisure activities as it is evidenced from the ‘use of time’ data, the bulk of the Bangladeshi migrants make their left over time worthwhile through various means of indoor and outdoor recreational activities.

To Bangladeshi migrant workers, leisure activity means watching television programs, or films on video and listening to music. Night is a very important for them.

²⁷ The thesis uses the words ‘leisure’ and ‘recreation’ frequently. A distinction between leisure and recreation can be sustained to the extent that the former, for most people, can be viewed as the time not given over to work whereas recreation can be viewed as the activities undertaken in that discretionary time. The thesis uses the terms interchangeably.

²⁸ Manpower Minister Dr. Lee Boon Yang in his speech to the employers told “Employers should take better care of their foreign workers, such as by organizing more activities and providing better opportunities for them to get together”, *The Straits Times*, “Do More for Foreign Workers”, 17 May, 1999.

²⁹ “Recreation Clubs for Foreign Workers” 15th June, 2000, *The Straits Times*.

Sometimes a group of migrants sit together, sing songs, share daily work experiences or childhood memories, or love and romance. This type of informal gathering often takes place at their residence or open space near residence at usually mid night. Patrol stations remains open for 24 hours. Sometimes, migrants are found sitting at different patrol stations until midnight and passing their time through gossiping. Playing card is also not unusual among a section of migrants, especially those migrants who live at worksites. These migrants are not in hurry to wake up early morning to commute to worksites. Therefore, they are in a privileged position to stay awake until late night for recreational purpose. Outdoor recreation means visiting 'Little India' on Sundays which most of the Bangladeshi migrants do regularly. Besides, a handful of migrants visit gardens, parks and shopping malls on their day off.

Movies, particularly Hindi movies, are very popular among Bangladeshis. Many of the migrants were found watching Hindi movies and listening to movie songs at night regularly. The video and audio systems are not very expensive in Singapore compared to their monthly income. Sometimes migrants get it free of cost from many kind Singaporeans. Particularly, block cleaners who clean the residential blocks receive these types of gadgets frequently as gift. Migrants borrow video tapes or VCDs from rent shops. The cost is borne by all. Some migrants are found listening to Voice of America and BBC Bengali programs on radio. Some migrants are found multilingual as well. Apart from their mother tongue Bengali and entertainment language Hindi, they can speak Chinese and Malay with little difficulty. Specially, migrants who are in Singapore for considerably long time have learned these two languages for the interaction with their Chinese and Malay foremen, supervisors

or employers. Other fellow migrants take help of these multilingual migrants for the communication with locals.

A brothel is situated on Desker Road in Little India. On Sundays, this road is found overcrowded by foreign workers. A handful of Bangladeshi migrants have girl friends who are foreign domestic maids. Since they both are foreigners and they have usually day off on Sundays, they meet at the first half³⁰ of Sundays to hang around park, shopping mall or sea beach. A few of them spend considerable amount of money buying gift for their girl friends. Sometimes this expensive romanticism leads to the economic misery for some of them. It is noteworthy to mention that foreign workers are not allowed to marry in Singapore. As a result, there is hardly any case of international marriage as we can see in Japan or even in Malaysia (see for details, Piper, 2000). Migrants who are having romantic relations with the foreign maids are found repeatedly highlighting the notion of “*Purushuto*”³¹ when asked. Detailed conversations with them often ended up with the perception that foreign currencies, goods and female body are inevitable elements of overseas working experience which entitle the individual, in their sense, to claim a perfect man- *purush*, “I have tasted all in overseas life” in the migrants’ language “*bidesh jibon-ar sob kichu-ee dheklam*”.

³⁰ In the Second half, Bangladeshi migrants usually gather at Little India while foreign maids at Lucky Plaza and near by places.

³¹ ‘*Purushuto*’ (*Purush* means man and *Purushuto* means manhood) is a Bengali word which roughly means that he is one who cares his manhood in terms of courage, leadership, or control over woman. When a Bangladeshi migrant in usual conversation says “*tumi purush na*” (you are not a *purush* /man), he usually means “he is coward or homesick”. However, an implicit impression of durable sexual intercourse, excessive lust for sex and the means to meet all these is also there depending on the person and context. Here, the term is used to indicate the latter sense.

Sundays are very important for foreign workers in Singapore. Foreign workers depending on their country of origin gather at different Sunday enclaves in Singapore. Bangladeshi, Indian and Sri Lankan workers gather at Little India, Thai workers gather at Golden Mile Complex at Beach Road, and Filipino maids at Lucky Plaza on Orchard road and the park next to Orchard MRT station. The history of Little India as a meeting place for Indian subcontinent immigrants can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The earliest Indian migrants resided in Chulia Street and were mostly Tamil traders, money-lenders and shopkeepers. As Chulia Street became crowded in the early nineteenth century, a second group, largely Sindhis, Gujeratis and Sikhs, moved to High Street area. Another group, mainly Indian Muslim textile and jewellery merchants established a third residential area in Arab Street. By the late nineteenth century, however, most Indians have chosen to settle in Serangoon Road, the present day Little India enclave (for details, Siddique and Shotam, 1982; Sandhu, 1969).

There are few roads and open spaces in Little India where foreign workers congregate. Sometimes, migrants gather as many as 50,000 (Straits Times, 31 July, 1997). The real significance of Sundays lies, perhaps, in the fact that in the space of several hours, the worker is able to be free from the labor of work and just concentrate on rejuvenating his relationships with friends, to find comfort in the company of thousands of other countrymen and cast away any sense of alienation. He is now first a Bangladeshi, and second, a worker. When Sunday evening comes, large throngs of these foreign workers gather on this particular stretch of Serangoon Road - at the Tekka Market, at the Mustafa market, on the grass patches, at the back lanes, in the coffee shops; virtually every spot that can be occupied. They come with a myriad of purposes: to meet relative and friends, to remit to

their families back home, to collect postal letters³², or to do shopping for the whole week. Sunday's Little India is a home away from home to them.

Migrants start gathering at Little India from noon and stay approximately till 11 pm. Bangladeshi migrants gather at particular place / road side. The spots of gathering at Little India depend first on the workers' home districts in Bangladesh and later on thanas or unions. At the first meeting with a fellow migrant worker, the question generally one hears is "*Apner desh kothay?*," that is, "where is your country?". Here country means 'district' to them and not the country 'Bangladesh'. There is a strict sense of *districtism* – a sense of belonging to a particular district and the tendency to favor the native district people over people from other districts - among the migrants. Most probably, because of this *districtism*, Bangladeshi migration to Singapore remained confined to the people of some districts in Bangladesh. Different road and open spaces in Little India are named unofficially after Bangladeshi district names. For instance, *Tangail Mhat* is the place where people from Tangail district conglomerate. This identification of place is vital for migrants' lives in Singapore.

Remitting money on Sundays is a common practice. As evening shadows deepen, the handful of workers swells to thousands, *hundi* men (who collect money to remit) start collecting cash from the workers. *Hundi* means 'remittance'. Migrants send money through *hundi* men. The *hundi* is the Bangladeshis' link to home, the channel through which they

³² Since migrants change their work place frequently because of the changes of the worksites, many of the migrants use the addresses of their friends and relatives who have more stable residence or of some Bangladeshi shops in the Little India area.

send money to their families. Though there are three official remittance agencies here for Bangladeshis, they prefer the *hundi's* rates. At this money market, the *hundis* and their runners broadcast their rates. A worker picks his *hundi*, tells him who the money should go to and his address, and hands over the cash. These *hundi* men are usually from same districts. Official agencies first exchange Singapore money for US dollars, then for Taka in Bangladesh. They levy an administrative fee; the *hundis* do not. The *hundi's* way: collect money, buy electronic goods or gold here to sell back home, deliver the promised sum and make a tidy profit.

Each *Hundi* man makes use of prominent migrants from each area of migrants' origin (mainly village) to convince other migrants. These migrants (middlemen) facilitate the operation of *hundi* men in a large scale. They advocate for particular *hundi* man. Data reveal that the bulk of the migrants remit money through the *hundi* men (95 per cent). The case of misappropriation is hardly heard. 94 per cent of migrants did not encounter any misappropriation while the remaining 6 per cent reported loss of their remittances one time. The reasons for the loss of remittances are quite complex. It may not be due to the dishonesty of the *hundi* men. Sometimes *hundi* men were robbed in Singapore or their goods were confiscated by the customs at Dhaka Air Port, Bangladesh. Such accidents often lead to misery for the both – *hundi* men and prospective recipient families.

There is a sign of emerging Bangladeshi shops (ethnic enclave economy) at one part of the Little India, for examples, Lembu road, Desker road, Roberts lane, Birch Road and Syed Alwai road. Many Bangladeshi entrepreneurs have started businesses here to meet the demands of Bangladeshi migrants. Many new shops have emerged recently with a Bengali

name and scripture. Bangladeshi shops sell goods and groceries that match with the taste of Bangladeshi migrant population. They sell Bangladeshi goods at a reasonable and competitive price. Since migrants remain busy on weekdays, and for a variety of reasons they visit Little India every Sunday, they choose to buy their weekly shopping from these Bangladeshi shops. In fact, the businesses of these shops are dependent on this migrant population. The groceries do not all come from Bangladesh. Shop-owners buy the groceries from Singaporean Indian whole-sellers as well. Thus, there is much cooperation rather than competition among the Bangladeshi and Singaporean Indian businessmen at Little India.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted the socio-economic conditions of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore. Precisely, 95 per cent of migrants spent between 11 and 18 hours at work. The data on the 'uses of time for work' evidences that migrants are spending long hour. From the perspective of the migrant, the higher working hour is a means to maximize wages. Migrants are earning quite a good amount of money compared to their home country. On average, a migrant is earning SG\$ 712 per month, which is at least three times higher than the monthly wage of a public servant in Bangladesh. On average, migrants can save around two-thirds of their wage if they are a bit parsimonious (and if they earn at least \$ 450 per month). 66 per cent migrants remitted more than their financial cost of migration to Singapore (SG\$ 7000). Broadly, migrant families used their remittances in six major areas. These six areas are given below in descending order: basic consumption, debt repayment, land purchasing/

regaining, house-making, loan to relatives (migration purpose) and education. The six major areas of intended uses of remittances are as follows (in descending order); basic consumption, land purchasing/regaining, house making, wedding ceremonies, education and debt repayment.

Apart from those mentioned above, a great deal of migrants' earnings are used for 'honor goods'- goods that especially brings in honor and prestige for the migrant families in relation to non-migrant families as those scarce goods are not easily available in the own country. In a strategy to uphold family's status in the community of origin, migrants are found spending on gold ornaments³³ and valuable and latest electronic goods in Singapore. These 'Singapori goods' (gold and electronics- known as purer and higher quality) have a visible impact for the migrant families in the community they belong to. At the first appearance, a 'Singapori migrant families'³⁴ are distinguished by the other families as owners of these special possessions. The reason behind spending a good amount of cash for gold is that the bulk of the migrants (69 per cent) were unmarried. Wedding in Bangladesh involves offering gold to brides. In addition, migrants are also aware of the manifest function of the honor goods, that is, it will reinforce migrants' social position in the community structure.

³³ Customs in Bangladesh allow migrants to bring in a limited amount of gold tax-free (200 gm). The gold is resalable with a considerable amount of profit.

³⁴ The term 'Singapori migrant family' is used in comparison to 'londoni family' used by Katy Gardner. 'Singapori migrant family' has some characteristic features. First of all, families' members are supposed to possess 'pure gold' of Singapore and 'foreign assembled electronic goods'. Although in Bangladesh those electronic goods are available, they are not as original as the Singaporean ones (believed by villagers).

Tables and Figures

Table 6.1

Socio-demographic Profiles of Bangladeshi Migrants in Singapore, N 126, 2000

Age Groups	Percents		Percents
Below 20	2.38	Occupations of Migrants Prior Migration	
21 to 25	33.33	<i>Self Employed</i>	41.27
26 to 30	39.68	<i>Farming in own land</i>	18.25
31 to 35	13.49	<i>Farming in shared land</i>	0
36 to 40	7.14	<i>Informal economy</i>	23.01
41 Above	3.97	Wage Employed	13.49
Marital Status		<i>Farming</i>	0
Married	30.95	<i>Formal Economy</i>	4.76
Unmarried	69.05	<i>Informal Economy</i>	8.73
Education (Years of Schooling)		Unemployed	32.54
1 to 5	21.43	Overseas Work	6.35
6 to 10	38.09	Student	6.35
SSC	21.43	Occupation of Others in Families	
HSC (10 to 12 yrs)	10.32	Self-Employed	42.06
Graduate (13 to 16 yrs)	7	Wage-Employed	11.90
Illiterate	1.59	Mixed	12.70
Religion		No earning members	33.33
Muslim	86.50	Earning Members in Families	
Hindu	13.50	One Member	38.09
Patters of Families		Two Members	17.46
Nuclear	10.32	Three Members	3.97
Extended	89.68	Four Members	2.38
Total Members of Families (N118)		Others	0.97
2 to 4	30.50	No Earning Members	33.33
5 to 7	38.13	Migrants' Districts of Origin, (N 126)	
8 to 10	17.79	Munshiganj	12.70
Above 11	13.55	Tangail	14.28
Migrant's Position in Family		Comilla	7.94
Male Members' Age Structure (N115)		Narayanganj	9.52
First Son	33.91	Narsingdi	3.17
Second Son	24.34	Mymensingh	3.97
Third Son	20.86	Shariatpur	5.55
Fourth Son	14.78	Dhaka	22.22
Fifth Son	2.60	Gazipur	5.55
Sixth Son	1.73	Others	15.07
Others	1.73	Number of Migrants in Migrants' Families	
Flood-Affected		Single (interviewee only)	49.21
Yes	74.60	Two	28.57
No	25.40	Three	14.28
Background in Bangladesh		Four	6.37
Rural	84.13	Five	1.59
Urban	15.87		

Table 6.2
Migrants' Years of Arrival in Singapore

Years of Arrivals	Percents
1993	3.97
1994	3.17
1995	4.76
1996	8.73
1997	15.07
1998	27.77
1999	30.16
2000	3.97
Others	2.38

N=126

Table 6.3

Financial Cost of Migration, N=126

Number of Months waited after payment	Percents	Financial cost of Migration	Percents
i. Less than 3 months	50	Less than 160,000 Taka	20.63
ii. 3 to 6 months	15.07	160,001 to 190,000	18.25
iii. 7 to 9 months	7.93	190,001 to 220,000	45.23
iv. 10 to 12 months	1.58	220,001 to 250,000	10.31
v. More than 12 months	10.31	250,001 to 280,000	4.76
vi. Not Applicable	15.07	Missing data	0.79
Sources of Arrangement of Financial Cost of Migration of migrants		Percentages of Cash Money Came from Different Sources for meeting cost	
Family or Personal Savings	53.17	Family and Personal Savings	30.07
Selling or Mortgaging Land	16.66	Selling and Mortgaging Land	7.33
Loan from Money lenders	15.87	Loan from Money Lenders	8.00
Borrowing from Relatives	36.50	Borrowing from Relatives	19.20
Foreign Remittances	42.85	Foreign Remittances	32.30
Miscellaneous (livestock, gold, etc)	3.96	Miscellaneous(livestock, cow)	1.60

Table 6.4
Patterns of Uses of Time for Work in a Day

A Weekly Working Day (Non-Sunday)	Percents (N125)	A Weekly Holiday (N125) (Sunday)	Percents
9 to 10 Hours	4.76	8 to 10 Hours	30.95
11 to 12 Hours	31.74	11 to 12 Hours	26.98
13 to 14 Hours	33.33	13 to 14 Hours	2.38
15 to 16 Hours	23.01	No Work on Sunday	38.88
17 to 18 Hours	6.34		

Table 6.5 Skill Composition of Migrant Workers

Status of Migrants	Previous Status, %, (on Arrival)	Present Status, %, (At Present)
Unskilled	91.27	51.58
Skilled	8.73	46.3
Do not Know	0	1.58

Missing Data 1, N=125

Table 6.6 Patterns of Wage of Migrants per Day

Wage Patterns (S\$)	Previous, %, (on arrival)	Present (%)
12 to 13	19.81	6.30
14 to 15	49.54	27.92
16 to 17	18.01	24.32
18 to 19	5.40	19.81
20 to 21	0.90	9.90
22 and Above	6.30	11.71

Missing Data 15,

N= 111

Table 6.7 Monthly Incomes and Savings of Migrants (SG\$)

Incomes (N125)	Percents	Savings (107)	Percents
250 to 400	2.4	Below 200	2.80
401 to 550	12.8	201 to 400	19.62
551 to 700	32.8	401 to 600	42.98
701 to 850	31.2	601 to 800	15.88
851 to 1000	15.2	Above 801	5.60
Above 1001	5.4	No Savings	13.08

Table 6.8

Expenses of Incomes of Migrants in Singapore (SG\$), (N126)

Patterns of Expenditure	Percents	Expenses on Lottery	Percents
On Basic Need- food,		Below 20	15.87
Transport, And		21 to 40	18.25
Pocket expenses		41 to 60	10.31
Below 100	3.17	Above 61	5.54
101 to 150	14.28	No Expense, Lottery	50.00
151 to 200	24.60	Expenses on IDD phone	
201 to 250	26.98	Below 20	19.04
251 to 300	11.96	21 to 40	33.33
301 to 350	10.13	41 to 60	15.87
Above 351	8.73	Above 61	13.48
		No Phone Call	18.25

Table 6.9

Patterns of Remittances to Bangladesh, N=126, SG\$=30

Ranges of Cash Amount (Taka)	Percents
Below 200,000 (SG\$ 7000)	34.12
200,001 to 300,000	19.84
300,001 to 500,000	24.60
500,001 to 750,000	12.69
750,001 to 1,000,000	1.58
1,000,001 to 1,500,000	3.17
1,500,001 to 2,000,000 (SG\$ 67,000)	0.79

Table 6.10

Areas of Expenditure of Remittances in Bangladesh, N= 126

Areas of Expenditure	<u>Already Used</u> Frequencies	<u>Intended Uses</u> Frequencies
Personal Consumption	74.59	81.74
Debt Repayment	45.08	15.07
Land	30.32	21.42
House-making	18.85	20.63
Education	13.93	16.56
Loan for migration	13.11	4.76
Savings	11.47	30.95
Wedding/ Birth/ Death	9.01	16.66
Medical	7.37	0
Productive (non-firming)	6.55	9.52
Productive (firming)	0.81	4.76
Others	3.32	3.17

Table 6.11

Expenses of Remittances in Bangladesh, N=126

Role of Remittances	Percents	Areas of Uses of Remittances	Frequencies
In Families' Budgets		For Honor Goods (N126)	
Primary Role (N=117)	40.17	Gold	65.07
Secondary Role	44.44	Cosmetics	48.41
No Role	15.38	Clothes	24.60
		Electronics	30.95
		No Spent on	25.39
Amount of Money (125)		Intended Uses of Money	Percents
Used for Honors Goods		for Honor Goods (N=126)	
Below 50,000	34.4	Below 50,000	10.31
50,001 to 100,000	15.2	50,001 to 100,000	30.15
100,001 to 150,000	9.6	100,001 to 150,000	29.36
150,001 to 200,000	6.4	150,001 to 200,000	3.17
200,001 to 300,000	4	Above 200,001	2.38
Above 300,000	4.8	No Comment	24.60
No Spent on Honor Goods	25.6		