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## Lives in Motion: The Life-Course, Movement and Migration in Bangladesh

October 2008

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As a particular genre of self help manual is apt to assert: 'life is a journey'. Whilst somewhat clichéd, the imagery evoked - of movement through one's life course over a variety of emotional or spiritual terrains - forms a useful entree to the theme of this paper: the relationship between the embodied journeys through time that anthropologists term 'the life course', and the journeys through space and place that, according to different contexts may or may not be classified as 'migration'. If life is a journey, one might ask, how does migration to particular places affect our experience of moving through life? Turn the question around and the answers provide fertile terrain for those seeking to understand *why* people migrate: how does movement through the life course affect our propensity to move? Whilst at first sight these answers would seem to concern the vagaries of individual lives and biographies<sup>1</sup> and hence the micro-level of analysis, by paying attention to how gendered life courses are shaped by culture, history and global economics, and how, in turn, these articulate with various forms of movement and migration between different places, we might discern the interconnectedness of *all* levels of analysis<sup>2</sup>, from the young man leaving his village, to the social networks that assist him in moving, and finally to the global histories and economic structures that have helped create the 'transnational habitus' (Vertovec, 2004: 11) of his community, in which movement abroad is seen not only as the only way to get on in life, but has become an expected part of his life course, in which by travelling abroad, he finally becomes a man.

In what follows, I shall discuss the relationship between the geographical movement of bodies and their movement through time with reference to cases drawn from my on-going research amongst Sylheti transnational communities in Bangladesh and the U.K. By doing this I hope to contribute to a broader discussion in migration studies concerning the relationship between migration and time (cf. King, Thompson, Fielding and Warnes, 2004), in which focussing on the life course has been invoked as a means of understanding the articulation between individual biographies with 'meso' level formations, such as households or other social networks, which are in turn shaped by wider conditions. As King et al comment: 'The relevance to migration is immediately apparent: the life course framework contextualises not only individual and group decisions about the timing of migrations but also the formative influences and outcomes.' (ibid: 19). In sum, my aim is not simply to present individual life histories, useful though such a project is (cf. Brettell, 2003: 23-45), but to indicate how these histories arise from particular life courses, which themselves are underscored by culture, context and, of course, gender.

The research on which the paper is based involves two villages in different parts of Greater Sylhet: Talukpur, in Habiganj, where I conducted my doctoral research in the late 1980s and have been regularly visiting ever since, and Jalalgaon, a

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the life history / biography approach to migration research, see Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Thompson, 1999, Bertaux-Wiame, 1979, Gardner, 2002

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the challenges of intergrating micro, meso and macro levels of analysis in migration research, see Brettell, 2000, 2003; Massey, 1990; Kearney, 1986

village in the thriving 'Londoni' (ie out migration to the U.K) area of Biswanath, a short distance from Sylhet Town, where I have been involved in recent research<sup>3</sup>. Whilst the work in Talukpur arises from my own ethnographic fieldwork, the research in Biswanath was carried out by a small team of researchers from the University of Jahangirnagar, who lived in the village for twelve months, following largely qualitative methods, including participant observation, interviewing and a household survey. In considering different forms of embodied movement through time and space we shall see how whilst migration must indeed be understood in terms of global and local political economies, we also need to appreciate how these broader contextual factors articulate with the everyday (or 'micro') concerns of self hood, gender and generation, as well as the livelihood strategies of individuals and households. Indeed, as the Bangladeshi examples indicate, the life course cannot be understood in isolation, for lives are not lived alone. To this extent it has to be analysed alongside another classical anthropological concept: the household development cycle.

Before returning to Bangladesh, I wish to consider the notion of the life course in rather more detail. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the various types of movement with which the paper deals.

### **Mapping Lives: Understanding the Life Course**

By 'life course' I am referring to the phases of life that we move through over time; an approach which emphasises interconnection rather than the disjuncture suggested by 'stages'. (Arber and Evandrou, 1993) Whilst in general the physiological processes of ageing are universal<sup>4</sup>, the way that these processes are experienced and the meanings given to them are understood by anthropologists as being culturally constructed. The phases of life are therefore not necessarily fixed to pre-defined physical markers, although physiological processes may, in some contexts, be central. For example, during my fieldwork in Sylhet in the late 1980s the tradition of painting a girl's hands with henna at her first menstruation was still carried out by some families, symbolising the advent of her womanhood as well as her marriagability. In the British context however, girls are not legally perceived to be women until they have reached their sixteenth birthday. Here it is the exact measurement of calendar years, rather than physiology, which is significant. The relationship between different phases of the life course is similarly diverse. In Uganda, for example, Karimojong men are organised into age sets, which move through life together and are distinguished from other generations by the colour of their ornaments (Dyson Hudson, 1966). Elsewhere, relationships between generations are more fluid, the produce of shifting social factors. In my research amongst Bangladeshi elders (*murubbi*) in East London, for example, I was told that one becomes a *murubbi* not when one reaches a certain age (in rural Bangladesh birthdays are not celebrated and people generally don't know how old they are) but according to family position (becoming a grandparent) as well as the knowledge and authority that a person is thought to have. The role of *murubbi* is actively performed: men grow beards and wear kameez and lungis rather than the more western clothes of younger men, and expect due deference to be shown to them (Gardner, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> This research was funded by Dfid, as part of the Development Research Centre in Migration, Poverty and Globalisation, run at the University of Sussex. Primary data collection was carried out by Rushida Rawnek Khan, AbdulMannan and Zahir Ahmed. I was the principle investigator of the project.

<sup>4</sup> This is not always the case. See, for example, Lock's discussion of cross cultural variation in the menopause in Northern America and Japan (Lock, 1995)

As the above indicates, as well as being culturally constructed, the life course is gendered, as Sylvia Vatuk and Sarah Lamb have shown with reference to women in India. Whilst Vatuk's work indicates the different roles and relationships that women pass through during their lives (Vatuk, 1987) Lamb's work focuses upon the embodiment of gender amongst women in West Bengal, describing how this changes over the life course (2000). As well as gender, the life course is also structured by ethnic identity and class (c.f. Catz and Monk, 1995; Sintonen, 1993, O'Brien, 1994). Finally, the way in which the life course is constructed is not fixed but continually changing. In the process, narratives of how childhood or old age 'used to be' are apt to become a metaphor for disquiet about the pace or direction of such change (cf. Cohen, 2000).

Focussing upon the life course opens up important questions concerning the ways in which gendered roles, relationships and identities change over time, as well how these shifting roles are embodied. As the Bangladeshi examples indicate, embodied movements through time often coincide with movement across space as well as shifting imaginings of and relationships to different places. Indeed, the experience that one has of places and the journeys one takes to get to them are informed by where one is situated in one's life. As we shall see, this can have significant implications for migrants, especially those moving across national or continental borders; the experience of elderly migrants in their places of settlement is an important area of enquiry (Norman, 1985; Blakemore, 1993; Boneham, 1989).

We should not, however, fall into the trap of assuming that people at certain points in the life course necessarily think of and experience places in the same way. We should also distinguish between the various and often contradictory images that the same person might hold about a single place. As I describe elsewhere, whilst Bangladesh may be idealised by some British based Bengalis as 'good' to age in, they also vote with their feet by largely staying put in Britain. British health care and the reluctance of British based children to accompany them back to Bangladesh are major factors (Gardner, 2002). In understanding how the life course is affected by place, we must therefore pay attention both to empirical realities: the existence of the National Health Service in the U.K, for example, as well as to the shifting and complex terrain of ideology.

Similarly, we need to beware reductive descriptions of 'ideal types'. As we shall see, movement through one's life from one expected phase to another is not necessarily guaranteed and the life course may not go as planned; for example, in cases of divorce, or when marriages fail to bear children. In the Bangladeshi context, these disruptions and dead ends can directly affect peoples' movement across space, either in propelling them into journeys they may not otherwise have taken, or by doing the opposite and keeping them in one place. Whilst in these cases unexpected life course events may lead to migration, migration may itself lead to unexpected twists of the life course: elderly Bengalis in the U.K describe how 'growing old in a foreign land' has meant they cannot fully enjoy the roles of grandparent and murrubi (elder), whilst the young Sylheti men who marry British brides may find the role of 'husband' or 'father' quite different from what is expected in Sylhet.

In sum, it may be useful to think of the life-course as a 'design for life', a template that we all, to some extent, are aware of, whether we adhere to it or not (for example, by doing or not doing 'what's expected'). This 'design for life' is deeply influenced by culture and history, as well as by gender, and underscores the roles and relationships we have throughout our lives. It is also, as some of the cases described in this paper show, continually changing.

### **Movement and Migration: What's The Difference?<sup>5</sup>**

The ethnography that follows involves a range of movements, only some of which would conventionally be described as 'migration'. People move through time as well as travelling up and down the social scale. Few physically stay in one place throughout their lives; indeed, Bangladeshi women are expected as a matter of course to move to their husband's home at marriage. Not all do, but the norm of patrilocality remains strong<sup>6</sup>. Combined with this, the inhabitants of East Bengal have always been mobile; the image of stable and sedentary villages is largely a myth (Samadar, 1999: van Schendel, 2005; Inden, 1990). In classifying some types of movement as 'migration', and suggesting that such movement is relatively new we are thus in danger of creating a false dichotomy between the past, in which people didn't move, and a modern age, in which 'migration' is a key trope, disrupting 'traditional' (read 'sedentary') life.

Yet it would also be misleading to suggest either that rural Sylhetis are nomadic, or that there is nothing new in the scale and type of movements taking place in the region. As we shall see, neither is true. People living in rural Sylhet have a strong sense of home and rootedness, exemplified by the phrase '*desh*' (homeland). There has also been a quantifiable shift in the scale of emigration to foreign countries over the last generation. In my use of the term 'migration' I am therefore referring to a specific type of geographical movement, which involves stepping over real or imagined borders. For many Sylhetis the borders are national: they have travelled overseas to join transnational communities in the U.K, the U.S, South East Asia and the Middle East. In other instances people have moved from villages of origin in which whilst they may be joining existing social networks in the new destination they are perceived as being to a greater or lesser extent 'outsiders'. In local terms they are no longer in their *desh* but *bidesh* (in a foreign place). This latter term refers to a sliding scale of locations, ranging from another region in Bangladesh to the other side of the world. As we shall see, whilst for some people migration is a yearned for step in projects of self transformation, for others it signifies crisis and disruption. In all cases, whether migration is welcomed or not, I would suggest that there is a degree of rupture, a sense of moving to a new land (*bidesh*), where even if one is joining the other half of one's transnational (or transregional) community, one is still, to a greater or lesser degree, in the role of being a foreigner (*bideshi*) vis a vis those who think of that place as their *desh*.

Let us now turn to the historical background of migration and movement in Sylhet and Eastern Bengal, where, as we shall see, people have always been on the move.

### **Migration in Sylhet : A Background**

As Tasneem Siddiqui points out, migration has been a part of life for East Bengalis for many centuries (2003). Indeed, the territory of what in the colonial period was East Bengal, in 1947 became East Pakistan and only since the War of Independence in 1971 has been known as Bangladesh has always been characterised by high degrees of fluidity, both within and across its shifting political borders. From pre-colonial times migrants from the west settled the highly fertile but often waterlogged lands of the east, whilst other historical evidence points to movement in

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<sup>5</sup> This question was raised by Sophie Day during discussion of an earlier version of the paper presented at Goldsmiths College, December 2006.

<sup>6</sup> In Sylhet: the *gharzamai* (literally 'house husband', or husband who lives with his wife's kin) is a figure of fun

the other direction, a continual flow of people, irrespective of national borders (Van Schendel: 2005). These constant, cross cutting migrations are both a result of the region's turbulent history, and its turbulent environment, in which floods and cyclones mean that 'belonging' can never be guaranteed. Ranabir Samaddar writes movingly that the country is: 'an insecure environment, inhabited by insecure families.' Such families dream constantly of escaping insecurity. As Samaddar continues: 'This dream has made Bangladesh a land of fast footed people, people who would not accept the loss of their dream, who would move on to newer and newer lands ....' (1999: 83-87)

Today, these fast footed people are moving both internally (see, for example, Afsar, 2000; Seeley, 2005, Van Schendel, 2005) and overseas, predominantly to the Gulf and to South East Asia (see, for example, Abrar, 2000; Siddiqui, 2003; Mahmud 1991; Gardner 1995). The scale of this movement is vast; as Siddiqui reports, from 1976- 2002 official figures show that over three million Bangladeshis migrated overseas, mostly on short term contracts<sup>7</sup>. Whilst some are middle class professionals, the vast majority migrate as wage labourers, often inhabiting the most vulnerable and lowly paid sectors of the international labour market. Many more move illegally. These migrants take huge risks in their attempts to access foreign remittances; many are either caught and deported before they have a chance to earn, or are cheated by unscrupulous brokers.

In Sylhet, international migration has a distinct character. Whilst large numbers of men from the district have migrated to the Middle East, far more influential has been the movement of people from particular areas to Britain. Indeed, approximately 95% of the British Bengali population is Sylheti in origin. Sylhet's special relationship with Britain started in the Nineteenth Century, when men from the district gained a reputation as '*lascars*' or sailors, working on British ships which carried goods from Calcutta to around the world. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a growing number of Sylheti *lascars* 'jumped ship' in London, where they stayed, seeking work as peddlers or in London's hotels and restaurants. (Chowdhury, 1993: 33) Although originally men from districts such as Noakhali and Chittagong were also *lascars*, by the Twentieth Century Sylhetis dominated (ibid: 33-35). The reasons are complex. One factor may have been the colonial system of land administration in Sylhet, which made many householders independent owner occupiers of land (*taluk dar*) rather than tenants on large estates owned by landlords (*zamindars*) contributing both to an entrepreneurial spirit as well as the capital reserves required to travel to Calcutta in search of ship work, thus giving them the numerical edge over men from other regions<sup>8</sup>. Another reason may be the riverine geography of the region, which produced a population experienced in boats and shipping. Crucially too, particular individuals dominated the recruitment of labour, thus leading to a 'chain' effect whereby men from particular villages and lineages gained employment through the patronage of their relatives and neighbours.

Whatever the reasons, by the time that work permits were being offered by the British government to men from the sub-continent in the 1950s, Sylhetis were well placed to gain maximum advantage. With a small but rapidly growing network of men already living in Britain, the chain effect continued. Such was the demand for the 'vouchers' that, as Chowdhury reports, an office of the British High Commission was

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<sup>7</sup> The Bangladesh government has banned women from certain categories of labour migration. They therefore officially only make up 1% of this figure (Siddiqui, 2003)

<sup>8</sup> Until 1947 Sylhet was part of Asaam, rather than Bengal and had a different system of land administration.

opened in Sylhet (Chowdhury, 1993). This remains open today. Some of the older Sylhetis living today in Britain had fathers and grandfathers who were *lascars*, a few worked on the ships themselves.

The vast majority of Sylhetis first came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s when the second phase of migration to '*Bilhati*'<sup>9</sup> took place. Prompted by a labour shortage after World War Two, the British authorities actively encouraged labour migration from its previous colonies and thousands of migrants embarked for the U.K (see Adams, 1987 and Choudhury, 1993). Arriving as young men in the post-war period, most lived and worked in cities such as Birmingham and Oldham, finding employment in heavy industry. Some went directly to London, working in the garment trade as pressers or tailors. Usually living in lodging houses with other Sylhetis this was a period of unremittingly hard work with as much money remitted home as possible. In today's terminology, the men were 'transnationals' par excellence: they worked and lived in Britain, but returned as often as they could to East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971) where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and village community, as well as regional and national political activities. Some men returned more than others. Partly it depended upon their immigration status. The men's particular family circumstances, in particular, whether they had a wife in Bangladesh, were also influential.

Over the 1970s and into the 1980s Britain's heavy industry was in decline and many Sylheti men moved to London to seek employment in the garment or restaurant trades. Crucially, a growing number started to bring their wives and children to the United Kingdom (See Peach 1996). This shift was partly the result of changing immigration laws, which many rightly feared would soon make primary migration to Britain (without it involving marriage to a British citizen) impossible. It also reflected wider changes in the areas where many Bengalis were settled, in which mosques, shops selling *halal* meat and other community facilities were becoming increasingly established. Today, the Bangladeshi population is the youngest and fastest growing in Britain. The 2001 Census enumerated a total population of 283,063<sup>8</sup> of which 38% were under sixteen. Fifty four percent Bangladeshis lived in London (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>) and nearly half of these are situated in Tower Hamlets where they form over quarter of the resident population (in some areas within the borough, this figure is higher). A recent Labour Force Survey (1997) estimated that 60% of male Bangladeshi employees and self employed worked in the 'Indian' restaurant trade<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> A local rendering of the cockney term 'Old Blighty'.

<sup>10</sup> [www.research-live.com/index.aspx?pageid=72&webeexclusiveid=8](http://www.research-live.com/index.aspx?pageid=72&webeexclusiveid=8) - 25k -



Figure 1 : Map of Bangladesh





Figure 2: Map of Sylhet, showing Nobiganj and Biswanath

## Migration and Transformation : Village Research

The formation of the Bengali community in the UK is linked to dramatic changes within the villages that originally sent men to Britain. Here, migration overseas has led to significant shifts in local power relations. In Talukpur, the village where I conducted my original research, households that had gained access to Britain in the 1960s, had, by the 1980s, accumulated large amounts of land. Most of these were middle income farmers, who already had some land and who could afford the capital outlay of a punt on migration to the U.K. Many were related to a handful of households which had originally supplied British ships with *lascars*; these founding fathers of migration helped their brothers and cousins find work and establish themselves once in Britain. Today, the household which I am closest to in Talukpur is still known as 'sareng bari' (ships's foreman, who in the 1940s or 50s helped recruit village men). In contrast, those who had neither the inclination nor the wherewithal to send members abroad were net losers. There was thus a direct correlation between migration to Britain and the accumulation of wealth, with the gains concentrated in particular villages which in turn were clustered in particular areas of Greater Sylhet, such as Beani Bazar, Moulvi Bazaar, Biswanath and Nobiganj. Within *Londoni* villages (ie those with a high concentration of members in Britain) gains were concentrated in the hands of particular families. Significantly, *Londoni* households were involved in intense projects of social transformation, reinventing their family genealogies as including Muslim *pir* (or saints), following a purer and more orthodox form of Islam, marrying into higher status families from further a field rather than local cousins, and building impressive houses (Gardner, 1995).

A similar story can be told in Jalalgaon, the village in Biswanath where the more recent research was carried out in 2005 (primarily by a team of researchers at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh)<sup>11</sup>. Here the outward effects of *Londoni* migration are even more extreme than in Talukpur. Situated only a few kilometres from Biswanath Town, with its resplendent shopping malls, fast food outlets and multi-storied community centres, Jalalgaon is a '*Londoni*' village *par excellence*. Alongside the humble single storied houses of those who never went to the U.K, the village is filled with the mansions of successful migrants. These may be up to three storeys high and are invariably surrounded by high brick walls. The architectural styles are reminiscent of the housing developments one might find in Dubai or Saudi Arabia, or in Baridhara, a rich (some may say *nouveaux riche*) district of Dhaka. Many have satellite dishes and some have smoked glass windows, an embellishment that until recent years was unseen outside of the U.S or Saudi Arabian consulates in Dhaka. Others refer directly to the migration experience of the owners; just as one might see stone lions guarding the gates of British homes, here stone aeroplanes adorn walls and roofs. In another house in Jalalgaon Manchester United's strip is painted on the outside wall. None of this would be so remarkable were it not for the stark contrast with the rest of rural Bangladesh, in which mud and thatch (*katcha*) houses are the norm. As in Mirpur, the Pakistani region documented by Roger Ballard, many of these houses are empty (Ballard, 2004). Others are lived in by caretakers, often poorer relatives of the departed families. During the course of our fieldwork, ten new houses were in the process of being built in the village. Others became temporarily occupied by a *Londoni* family, who after a few months returned to the U.K.

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<sup>11</sup> This research was funded by the Development Research Centre in Migration, Poverty and Globalisation at the University of Sussex.

The population of the village is thus in constant flux. Whilst some households have relocated permanently to Britain, a great many more have moved in, but these consist of far poorer people, attracted by the economic boom caused by overseas migration. During the fieldwork in Jalalgaon, ninety seven households that identified themselves as 'insiders' were counted, their families having lived in Jalalgaon for over two or three generations. Of these, thirty four were known locally as 'Londonis', meaning that a member had migrated to the U.K. Some were permanently absent in Britain, but others still had members living in Jalalgaon. The remaining sixty three 'insider' households either had no migratory experience, or had sent members to the Middle East.

In addition to these ninety seven 'insider' households were a great number of other people who had migrated into the area either permanently, or for a more temporary period, and despite living locally were seen as outsiders. On the periphery of the village's *baris* (compounds, originating from an original household that over the generations has divided into separate households, and therefore usually consist of patrilineal kin) are twenty five 'colonies': thatch, breeze block and tin buildings, reminiscent of urban slum housing, which at the time of our survey housed one hundred and forty seven households, a total of seven hundred and fifty people. As well as the population of the colonies are the temporary and permanent labourers who live largely in the households of 'insiders', (some also stay in the colonies). During the fieldwork there were one hundred and sixty nine labourers who originated from outside the village, living in thirty three 'insider' households. During the harvest and planting seasons this number is boosted by other workers who either stay temporarily in the colonies, or are housed by their employers.

There can be little doubt that overseas migration has led to a boom in the local economy. Indeed, a national study estimates that Bangladeshi remittances of \$610 million created \$351 million in goods and services and generated at least 577,000 jobs (Arnold, 1992, cited in Vertovec, 2004: 41). As the Biswanath data shows, Londoni migration has led to increased employment opportunities for internal migrants, who, attracted by higher wages, move from poorer areas of the country to villages such as Jalalgaon to work as labourers. There has been a huge boom in the construction industry, which also has led to increased employment and demand for goods, as well as in industries which service return migrants and their spending power: food outlets, minibuses and taxis, mobile phone shops, and so on. This in turn is linked to the in-migration of people from outside the village described above.

The extent to which this boom, based on insecure remittances and property development rather than an increase in agricultural or industrial production, will last over the next generation of British born Bengalis is questionable, (and not an issue I have time to deal with in much detail here). What I would emphasise, however, is the extent to which in Jalalgaon as well as Talukpur families who originated in the area are dependent to a greater or lesser extent on maintaining transnational links with their British based relatives. This is both in order that they can continue to receive the support of their wealthy British relatives (usually these days in the form of one off donations, often to help set up a business, fund further migration, or marriage, or to help in times of crisis), and also because access to Britain and other foreign countries is now seen as virtually the only way to get on in life. Whilst rural hierarchy was once organised around access to land, today the inflation of land prices means that it is generally only through access to foreign wages that one can buy such land. The new axis around which hierarchy is now ordered is therefore that of access to place: those who are either living in Britain, or who have close kinship links to those in Britain,

are at the top of the hierarchy, whilst those without links either to foreign countries, or even to Sylhet – the in-migrants, are at the bottom.

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From this background, let us return to the central theme of the paper: how migration and movement articulate with the life course. In my earlier work I considered how migration to Britain affected the experience of ageing amongst elderly first generation Bangladeshis in East London (Gardner, 2002). In order not to repeat myself, in what follows I will not be focussing so much upon the effects of migration on the life-course per se, but more on the influence of the life course on different types of geographical movement, an issue which so far has tended to be examined in European contexts (cf. King et al, 2004; Mulder, 1993; Lundholm, 2007). I shall start by discussing marriage, one of the most importance life course events for the vast majority of Bangladeshis, though one which has very different implications for men and women. In the latter part of the paper I shall turn to cases where the life course is disrupted, either by divorce, or by unexpected and untimely death. As we shall see, geographical movement is highly gendered in Bangladesh, articulating with the life course in a range of different ways for men and women. Yet whilst in all of the cases that follow, people move over their lives through a range of expected gender roles and relationships which in turn influence movement across space, that very movement across space can also lead to a realignment and shifting of gender roles, a phenomenon already documented in detail by Naila Kabeer's study of female garment factory workers in Dhaka and London (Kabeer, 2000)<sup>12</sup>

### **Marriage, Movement and Migration in Sylhet: Brides'Tales**

In Bangladesh, marriage is a major marker of the life course signifying a profound change in roles and relationships for brides and grooms. Conventionally this is particularly the case for women, who move from being daughters to being wives and daughter-in-laws and whose weddings mark the advent of adult womanhood. Crucially, for the majority of women marriage involves geographical as well as social movement, for the norm is of patrilocality means that they move to their husband's household. In the past in Talukpur this often involved short distances, either to *baris* within the same village, or to villages a couple of miles across the fields<sup>13</sup>. During my fieldwork in the 1980s, I observed several new brides being carried on their new affines' shoulders on a *palki* (covered platform, made with bamboo) to their homes in nearby villages, a practice that today has largely died out due to the improved accessibility of Talukpur to cars and rickshaws. Wedding ceremonies ritualise the disruption of a daughter's relationship to her natal home; the songs that women sing as they paint the bride's hands with henna the night before often revolve around metaphors of travel, as well as death. In 1988, for example, I recorded this song, performed by women the night before a wedding:

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<sup>12</sup> For wider discussion of the relationship between gender and migration, see, for example, Pessar and Mahler, 2001; Silver, 2004; Brettell, 2003

<sup>13</sup> It is customary for wives to return to their natal homes at least once a year for a visit (*naori*). For those living close by, these visits may be far more frequent.

*I am going to a new country today as a bride  
My father-in-law's home is full of darkness  
Riding on the bamboo casket, four men will carry me on their shoulders  
In front and behind will be the bridal party  
They will read the Kolima (ie confess the faith at the funeral procession)  
Wife, son, daughter, sister and brother - all will become my enemy  
Ah, new bride I will leave my own country  
I will wear a white sari (ie funeral shroud)*

Since the early 1980s marriage for some women in Sylhet has meant a more radical departure, for if married to a *Londoni*, it has involved migration to Britain. As mentioned earlier, whilst originally the wives and children of British migrants remained in Bangladesh, from the early 1980s onwards processes of family reunification had started to take place. This meant that by the time of my doctoral fieldwork in 1987-88, many wives and children had 'cases' pending with the British High Commission. Today all of these people are settled in Britain. For young women whose marriages were being arranged with *Londonis*, their marriage meant not only movement to their husbands' households but, once they had been cleared by the immigration authorities, a journey of thousands of miles to Britain. In 1987, for example, I attended the wedding of Najma. Enacting the role of physically passive, and grief stricken bride, Najma was carried onto a boat by her husband's family, where she was taken to his bari in another village. The next time I saw her was in Bethnal Green. She has since returned to Bangladesh to visit her natal family only a few times.

It would be mistaken to think of such marriages as either 'forced', or as simply taking place as a migration strategy. From the perspective of Najma's family in Talukpur marriage to a successful *Londoni* family meant that her material comfort and economic security was guaranteed. For her husband's family, the marriage forged a new link with the *desh*. As Katherine Charlesly's work on Pakistani transnational marriages indicates, (2003, 2005) brides from the *desh* are often preferred to British born and bred women, for their cultural capital, their relative willingness to assume the role of dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, and the reinforcement of links with the homeland. It should be noted too, that the movement of brides to Britain has been matched by a more general shift towards marriage to more physically distant partners *within* Bangladesh. As my 1980s research showed, there has been a significant change in the pattern of marriage alliances in recent decades in Talukpur. In contrast to people who had been married for ten or more years (most of whom had married cousins or neighbours within the immediate area) a growing proportion of marriages arranged over the last decade were with non-related spouses whose families lived as far afield as Sylhet Town or even Dhaka. This, I suggested, was one strategy amongst many in the projects of upwards social mobility with which *Londoni* households were engaged (Gardner, 1995).

In other cases, migration overseas has had the reverse effect. Rather than moving to their in-laws' home, either elsewhere in Bangladesh or in Britain, the migration of their husbands overseas has meant that some women have physically stayed put. In Talukpur I know of at least four women in this position. All have husbands who have temporarily migrated to the Gulf. Rather than living with their parents-in-law, the women opt to stay with their own parents, where they experience greater freedom and more support than in their in-laws' home. Rozana Rasheed cites similar cases in Comilla, where there are several scenarios for 'left behind' wives,

including women living with their parents, with their parent-in-law, or sometimes alone (Rasheed, 2008). Remittances may also play a role in decisions concerning where to live. As Rasheed shows, wives living with their in-laws' often lose control of their husband's remittances to his parents (Rasheed, 2008).

In cases where wives stay with their parents, male migration may be perceived as preventing them from moving through the life course in what they perceive to be a 'proper' manner, even if they are benefiting from the support and comfort of living 'at home'. Women in this position tend to express feelings of frustration, of having to spend their lives waiting for their husbands to return so that they can resume 'normal' roles and relationships. Marriages to migrants thus tend to evoke ambivalent emotions. Whilst life with the in-laws may be more challenging, Shalini told me that it was part and parcel of being a 'good' wife and daughter in law; she was happy to be with her parents for the time being, especially now that she was pregnant with her second child, but she really ought to be performing the role of a dutiful daughter-in-law in her absent husband's house. It is good for husbands to work in the Gulf to earn wages, other women say, but how can they be proper wives if the men are never there? For Santi Bibi, whose husband originally migrated to Britain in the 1960s, where he married an English woman and had a second family, his continued absence meant that she only had one child and could only be a 'proper' wife when he finally returned in the late 1990s in order to die in the *desh*: he had terminal cancer.

Whilst marriage is often experienced by women as somewhat ambivalent, hopefully bringing the blessings of a happy conjugal relationship, children, and the sense of fulfilling one's gendered roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law, but also involving separation from one's natal kin and hence a degree of rupture, when international migration is involved, the ambivalence is therefore heightened. Whilst the migration of a husband to the Gulf may bring the hope of financial security and status, it inevitably brings the long term absence of one's husband. Meanwhile movement to the U.K as the wife of a 'Londoni' may signal the fulfilment of family dreams and aspirations concerning connection to *bidesh* but it also brings separation and rupture. As we shall see, when men migrate for marriage, these contractions, 'pay offs' and shifts in role become even more complex.

### **Masculinity, Marriage and Migration to the U.K: Grooms Go West**

In recent decades the profile of transnational marriages has started to change, adding an interesting twist to the conventional relationship between gender and movement at marriage. Whereas in Bangladesh it is normally women who move to join their husbands' households, and the *ghar jamai* (husband who lives with his wife's family) is a figure of fun, today an increasing number of husbands are moving from Sylhet to Britain, to join British based wives<sup>14</sup>. As we shall see, the effects on their roles and relationships are potentially enormous. Once again migration is experienced in ambivalent terms: the power of 'London' as an aspiration and source of economic security, an individual man's desire to become a successful migrant, plus the need to reinforce transnational family bonds, are all balanced against the potential problems that grooms may experience in the U.K. These disadvantages include punishing working hours, low public status, and being married to a wife who is hugely more experienced and 'at home' in the U.K than oneself, with all the attendant implications for male status and self-respect.

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<sup>14</sup> For discussion of Pakistani men joining British based women, see Charsley, 2003

Despite these problems there is little doubt that marriage to a British woman is desired by many young men and their households in Sylhet. Such marriages may be a means to ensure continued transnational links with Bangladesh for households based in Britain, as well as a route into Britain for Bangladeshi based men. Sources at the British High Commission in Dhaka estimate that about half of the British partners bringing Bangladeshi spouses to Britain are now women. Foreign Office figures show that in 2005, 1530 settlement visas were granted to Bangladeshi grooms (with 330 refused), in contrast to 2133 issued to brides (with 590 refused). These figures have remained relatively stable since 2001<sup>15</sup>. A 2004 Report from the Home Office (*Control of Immigration Statistics*) cites a rise of 14% of husbands admitted from the Indian sub-continent since 2003, compared to a rise of 12% of wives.

I do not have systematic data, but anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of these marriages may involve relationships between cousins<sup>16</sup>. Here, marriages between British women and their Bangladeshi cousins consolidate links between families who, with some households having been reunited in Britain, are now almost wholly apart. In one case for example, two sisters who have been living in Manchester since they were small children have married the sons of their Bangladesh based paternal uncles (*sassatobiye*), who they once lived with in the same *bari* (but in separate households). A third woman, this time a maternal cousin, has married the youngest brother, who has recently relocated to the UK. All brothers live in the same neighbourhood in Manchester with their British-Bengali wives. My impression is that the experience has been largely positive for both sides. The British households maintain their links with the *desh* (homeland), marrying their daughters to cousins whose characters are already well known to them and who, tied closely into their kinship network, are unlikely to abscond once they have gained British citizenship (see Charsley, 2003, for observations on Pakistani marriages). Meanwhile the Bangladesh based households forge their own, direct links with Britain through the settlement of their sons there. Overall, the marriages benefit both households, solidifying kinship links between places while allowing for another member of the *gusti* (patrilineage) to migrate.

In these cases, marriage – a major juncture in the life course of all Bangladeshis – leads directly to migration to the U.K. Since both movement abroad to earn foreign wages AND marriage are central to the construction of Sylheti masculinity it is hardly surprising that so many young men of a certain class aspire to have a marriage arranged with a British girl. Indeed, whilst I would not go so far as to suggest that Sylheti youths do not become fully fledged men until they have migrated abroad, becoming a wage earning migrant, either to the U.K or the Gulf, is central to the construction of men as successful providers. In a case cited by Rozana Rasheed in Comilla, for instance, a father who was experiencing difficulties with his wayward son, sent him to the Gulf, so that he could ‘learn to be a man’ (Rasheed, 2008). As mentioned earlier, in Sylhet people’s access to foreign places is a central signifier of their relative social and economic status. A young man’s ability to become connected to the U.K, (which now is almost wholly possible only through marriage) is therefore a central way in which he can prove himself to be a cosmopolitan man of the world. In this context we can see how the life course and kinship intersect with the global political economy to produce a group of young men in Sylhet whose main aim in life, for a few years at least, is to find themselves a British bride.

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately the FO were not able to provide data for previous years.

<sup>16</sup> For the Pakistani case, see Shaw 2001.

For this group of young men, their dreams of movement to the U.K are associated with particular styles and modes of being, all of which express an orientation towards and connection with the Londoni community in Britain. British street fashion is followed, for example, and hair cut 'David Beckham' style (in 2005). Trips to local towns may involve visiting 'Western style' fast food outlets (such as 'Rahman's Fried Chicken'), or the hiring of an immigration lawyer. Shebul is a good example of a would-be Londoni. Aged thirty, he lives with his two brothers and his mother and is keen to follow in the footsteps of his oldest brother, who with the help of their British based sister-in-law married a Londoni bride and is now settled in the U.K. Shebul is also pursuing marriage with a Londoni woman. As he told us: "If I am able to go to London my luck will change. I will be helped a lot by my in-laws who will be able to find me a job .... After that my next step will be to try and arrange a marriage with my younger two brothers as soon as I arrive in London. I really don't think there's any point in them staying here. They have to get to the U.K. They'll achieve nothing by staying here. Here there is nothing: no income, no security, no certainty."

Interestingly in Jalalgaon the quest for a British bride is linked to particular employment strategies by some young men, in which setting themselves up in business or other high status activities will, it is hoped, make them more marriageable. In one case a shopping mall has been opened by a *Londoni* in the local bazaar. So far the business has made only losses. When asked why he continued to keep it open, the owner explained:

*It's important that our relatives have got something to do. The young generation are working in a shop rather than doing nothing. The main reason they've got involved in business is to prove to their brides that they own a posh shop. Some of them are supported by their Londoni relatives and others have raised money by selling land or other property. Last year about ten to twelve young men from round here got married to London brides ... "*

In another case, an English medium school was opened by a group of six young entrepreneurs in the village. Five of these have now married British women and moved to the U.K.

Although I have not done systematic research on the experiences of grooms in Britain, anecdotal evidence suggests that once IN Britain their lives are often very different from their expectations. Working double shifts in a restaurant and living in a city where he does not speak the language with a wife who, unlike him, is fully conversant with the U.K, and, indeed is very much more highly educated, Mobed is said by his Bangladeshi relatives to be having a difficult time. In Britain his role as a husband and, eventually, a father, will be a significant departure from what he might have expected in Bangladesh, structured as these roles partly are by the conditions of life in Britain. Here we see how place affects the life course. We also see how the life course is closely interwoven with wider household relationships which themselves depend in part upon particular political economies and geographies. As Katherine Charley has described in her work amongst Pakistani transnational families, grooms from South Asia often find their gendered roles reversed, with their British born and bred wives yielding a great deal more power than they would in Bangladesh, and their roles as fathers, husbands and providers radically altered (2003, 2005). Meanwhile for my Bangladeshi friends who have three sons in Britain, the rewards have not been what they expected, for rather than being able to remit directly to their Bangladesh



households, the sons now have to support their wives and young children in the U.K whilst facing a dire employment market in the North East. All the same, the family are currently working hard to arrange a marriage between their last remaining son in Bangladesh.

### **The End of the Life Course: Death**

Whilst for most people marriage is an *expected* part of the life course, the end of life's journey, death, is unavoidable. For successful first generation Londonis, death often involves a final trip back to the *desh*. As I recount in 'Age, Narrative and Migration', a great many British based Sylhetis return to Bangladesh either to die, or to be buried (2002). Although sending bodies overseas involves the *haram* (ritually forbidden) process of embalming, the Muslim undertakers Hajji Tasleem estimate that about 60-70% of Bengali corpses are sent to Bangladesh by their British based kin. There, they are usually buried in family owned land close to patrilineal homesteads or in some instances in graves close to the shrines of famous Sylheti *pir* (saints) which can be acquired at some cost. Once returned to Sylhet International Airport<sup>17</sup>, the bodies of deceased migrants are transported as quickly as possible to their villages. During my visits to Talkpur I have observed the return of dead Londonis on several occasions<sup>18</sup>. In the most memorable, the corpse was transported in a traditional covered boat down the river, garlanded with flowers and accompanied by male relatives and a cassette recorder loudly broadcasting Muslim prayers. For first generation British Bengalis, many of whom have spent a life time moving between places, endlessly evaluating their past, their present and their futures in terms of a shifting and fantasised 'other' land, these journeys back to Bangladesh mark the last physical movement of their bodies. Buried in the soil of their desh, they finally come to rest.

For Bangladeshis who do not have access to foreign countries and do not have sufficient property to cushion them from periodic shocks and crises, the death of an economically productive member may lead to the need to migrate as a survival strategy. Here, we move from the context of relatively secure and wealthy *Londonis*, to those whose livelihoods are highly precarious: the 31% of Bangladesh's population who are said to live in 'chronic poverty': around 25-30 million people (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 2006). In these cases, the effects of an individual reaching the end of their life course depends upon the stage their household is at in its own development cycle. Indeed, to understand the effects of the life course upon migration one has to understand how lives are lived within wider contexts of household relationships, not only distinguishing between the life course of the individual, the cycle of the family and history of the household (Laslett, 1983) but also understanding how all are interlinked, or what Roberston terms the 'cycle of reproduction' (Robertson, 1991: 195).

For households without substantial assets, survival depends upon a constant balancing of household consumption needs and productivity. If consumption needs suddenly outstrip the amount that members produce (for example, if the costs of a daughter's wedding has to be covered, or if medical costs arise) the household may no

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<sup>17</sup> The airport in Sylhet Town started to receive international flights, from Britain and the Middle East, in 1999.

<sup>18</sup> In all the cases I came across, the deceased was male. The most probable reason for this is demographic: since men tend to marry younger women, their British based wives are not yet at an age when death is common. I was told by my hosts that women may also be buried back in the *desh*.

longer be sustainable. The death of a member therefore only leads to household breakdown if the balance between production and consumption is tipped out of balance. If an ageing couple have two or three economically productive sons in a joint household, the death of an elderly father need not lead to economic catastrophe. For others, however, the death of a member and the lack of a sufficient economic or social safety net in their home village can lead to the failure of the household's livelihood and the need to migrate. As described above, *Londoni* villages in areas such as Biswanath attract many internal migrants, who cite 'poverty' or 'hunger' as the main motivation for their movement. Whilst environmental factors (flooding, for example) and regional seasonal shortfalls in food production are often central, so too is the delicate balance between life course events and the household development cycle. This may involve death or illness, as well as the expense of daughters' weddings. Amena's story is a good example. Migrating into Jalalgaon from the district of Kishorgonj, she has been living with her daughters in one of the local 'colonies' (bustee style dwellings) for about twelve years.

*I have three daughters and two sons. In our village, we had a considerable amount of land which my husband cultivated, as well as pulling a rickshaw. We were getting on well. But suddenly, my husband became paralyzed, so it was difficult for us to survive. My sons were still children, so we had to sell a lot of our land. We had to sell even more to pay for the marriages of my three daughters.*

*One of my brother-in-laws lived in Biswanath. Seeing our condition, he told my two daughters that they could come to Biswanath and find work so they can feed their children. Later, two of my sons also came to Biswanath with their wives. Meanwhile I remained in Kishorgonj with my sick husband, where my life was unbearably hard. Sometimes, my daughters sent me money and I survived in that way. After about ten years of my daughters coming to Biswanath, their father died. After that my daughters took me to Biswanath. Since then, I've been living here.*

### **Ruptured Relations: Divorce and Abandonment**

As the above case indicates, for the poor in Bangladesh migration is often used as an economic survival strategy, especially when life course events (such as death) mean that a household's livelihood has become unviable and its members have to move to seek alternative livelihoods, either permanently or periodically<sup>19</sup>. The life histories of other in-migrants in Jalalgaon indicate not only how life course events such as death can lead to the failure of livelihoods and hence migration to seek alternative sources of income, but also how smooth progression over one's life course is far from guaranteed. For example, whilst it may be the *norm* that once a woman is married her husband and his family have certain obligations towards her, in reality things don't always go as planned. For the poorest women, abandonment by husbands, and subsequent remarriage, was a constant theme in their stories. The following case illustrates the relationship between a disrupted life course and migration:

Shahena, who currently lives in Jalalgaon, told us:

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<sup>19</sup> As the Biswanath research showed, whilst sometimes prompted by household crises such as death, rural – rural migration is a long term strategy for many Bangladeshis who move either permanently or periodically to supplement their livelihoods, and therefore does not result solely from crisis.

*The story of why I came here is full of sorrow. During independence war in 1971, I was about six. The Pakistani soldiers attacked our village and killed my father. My mother was heartbroken and died the same year. I was the youngest of three sisters and one brother. After our parents' death we were helpless, and my older sister had to look after us. Our house was on the river bank, where we had a little land. My sister couldn't look after us alone, so she was helped by one of my maternal uncles. After a year he married my oldest sister off, followed by my other sister and brother. I was only a child, but my uncle made me get married to a man who was from Mymensing.*

*After my marriage, I stayed for one month in my in-law's house, in Mymensing. After that my husband took me to Sylhet to see the graveyard of Hazrat Shah Jalal. That night he took me to Biswanath, where he said some of his brothers lived. Next morning, he went off to find his brother and never returned. I still don't know whether he is dead or whether he left me. I waited for him for about two weeks. I knew the name of my village but not how to get back there. Eventually the people in whose house I was staying said I could carry on living there if I worked for them. After about nine months, since my husband hadn't returned they married me off to someone else.*

*I was getting on well with the second husband, but after a while, he began to marry other women, again and again. In ten years of our marriage, and after I'd had a son and daughter, he married 11 times. In the end I got fed up and went to the Union office and divorced him and married another man who is from Kishorgonj but who lives in Biwanath. That's how I ended up here.*

In other cases, marital breakdown may have the opposite effect: rather than moving, women stay put, both geographically and in terms of their life course. In Rubi's case, rumours about her sexual propriety were passed on to her husband whilst he was working in the Gulf. At the time she was living with her parents-in-law in a village about five miles from her natal home, but relations quickly turned sour and after her in-laws became physically abusive she returned to her parents' home. Shortly afterwards her husband wrote to tell her he was taking another wife. Today, she has no idea who spread the rumours and is still living with her parents, a single woman without children who has been unable to move into the expected roles of wife, mother and mother in law. As Rasheed's research in Comilla shows, such rumour mongering concerning the behaviour of 'left-behind wives' is not unusual in communities where overseas migration is common, an outcome perhaps of the increased insecurity of marriages separated by many thousands of miles (Rasheed, 2008).

It would be mistaken to assume that the disruption of relationships is necessarily experienced as negative. Alpa Shah for example has shown that migration from Jharkhand to brick fields in other areas of India can be a way of escaping restrictive relationships in home villages. In particular, young people move in order to enjoy love relationships with members of the opposite sex working in the kilns (Shah, 2006). Whilst I do not have comparative examples from Talukpur or Jalgaon, Shah's work is an important rejoinder to public and academic discourses which represent internal migration as resulting from poverty and hence 'bad' (ibid: 92). As Shah's ethnography also shows, the way in which the life course structures particular

relationships between people and places may not always be welcomed. Movement can thus in some contexts be read as a form of resistance

### Conclusion

As I have argued in this paper, one way that the anthropology of migration might analyse different types of movement is through consideration of the life course, a concept which focuses our attention on the way that lives are structured by cultural expectations, gender, and historical contexts as well as individual choice. Since life courses are themselves subject to change and influenced by global structures (such as the continually shifting and deeply gendered international labour market), this approach might help us connect the 'micro' level of individuals with the 'macro' level of structure, a long-standing challenge to migration studies (Brettell, 2000, 2003; Kearny, 1986). A further advantage of the life course approach is that it also connects individuals with the 'meso' level of households, communities and networks, since life courses are necessarily *relational*: as 'designs for life', they involve expected roles and relationships to others.

As the paper has suggested, the life course articulates in complex and ever shifting ways with place. Whilst in some instances movement is part and parcel of one's 'design for life', (for example via marriage for women, or involving migration to the Gulf as part of becoming a successful man), in other contexts geographical movement might lead to a radical disjuncture between how one expects the life course to unfold and what actually happens. The elderly Bengali women who I interviewed in London in 1996 and 1997, for example, often expressed deep disorientation and disappointment with how their lives had turned out. They had started out their lives with particular expectations of what would happen as they grew older, but in the British context old age was radically different (Gardner, 2002).

In the case of Londoni villages in Sylhet, the ideal 'design for life' involves migration to Britain as part of a successful life journey, especially for young men. Whilst marriage for women has traditionally involved migration to their husband's homes, today young men also hope that as they reach a marriageable age, their marriages will involve movement, not to a nearby village but to Britain. For those who do not make it, life's journey has few if any other desirable destinations. In this context globalisation and the history of migration to Britain from Londoni villages in Sylhet have altered peoples' expectations and aspirations over the course of a generation. At the prospect of NOT getting a tourist visa to Britain, where he hopes he will find himself a bride, Talleh is unable to think of what else to do with his life. Finally, when the expectations one has aren't met, the disruption may lead to physical movement. Divorce, illness, or the sudden death of a relative who is supposed to be contributing to household productivity were all central causes of migration from poorer areas of Bangladesh to Biswanath amongst our informants in Jalalgaon.

This leads me to my final point. The anthropological conceptualisation of the life course is not about how individual lives unfold *per se*, but how they are expected to unfold, a process that is usually understood as a series of phases linked to physical age. In analysing the life course we are therefore delving into the territory of ideology, dreams and expectations rather than established bodily facts. The only thing we can be sure of is that we've been born, and some time after our birth, we will die. The rest is up to culture, class, gender and, of course, the vastly complex and contradictory forces of global history.

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