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Opinion Piece

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ASA Globalog

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Some 'migration moments' …..

Dr. Katy Gardner, Anthropology, Sussex
April 22nd

I thought I'd kick off this blog with some reflections on one of the opening speeches at a conference on 'Children and Migration' in Cork that I recently attended. In this, the Executive Director of Unicef Ireland, Melanie Verwoerd, concluded that (a) trafficked, exiled and asylum seeking children suffer, are excluded and discriminated against, and thus (b) migration is a bad thing and should be stopped. I am, I admit, unfairly paraphrasing: Melanie's points were made with reference to children escaping the recent conflicts in Kenya, many of whom have had horrendous experiences. Yet by conflating stories of children escaping violent conflict with wider remarks about 'migration', and in her thematic slippage from war, bloodshed and children's victim hood to human movement in general, I don't feel that the good Ms Verwoerd was being particularly helpful. What such remarks do is reinforce a view to be found in no end of newspaper columns, blogs, policy papers and conference speeches: migration is a symptom of globalisation run amok, causes social breakdown, loss of traditions and identity, and, like holes in the ozone layer and world poverty, should be prevented and / or stopped. Not all of those espousing such views are right wing Daily Mail readers. I've heard similar remarks made by leftist activists working for migrant rights in South Asia.

The purpose of this blog is not to argue the opposite, viz that all migration is somehow *good* or to be celebrated (interesting how human movement becomes so embedded in morality): to do so would be as reductive as to suggest that all migration is bad. As anthropologists have long shown, there are a huge variety of complex reasons why people move plus a huge variety of complex outcomes (ask an anthropologist anything and the words 'complex' and 'variety' usually come up). Instead, I want to describe how the form of migration which I know best, the long standing transnational movement between Britain and Bangladesh, which I've been researching and writing about since the late 1980s, looks different according to where one is geographically located, plus of course whose perspective one is taking. *Who* is it good or bad for? The migrants? The people left behind or the people in the places where migrants have settled? None of these groups is homogeneous and neither are their experiences straightforward. So in attempting to describe and analyse this complexity and these varied perspectives, whose interests do we serve?

In what follows I'm going to share several 'migration moments', each of which leads to different ethical problems and political responses. I'm not sure I have any very astounding answers, just some reflections.

The first of my 'moments' came early in my anthropological career in 1988. Nearing the end of my fieldwork in Bangladesh (where I was studying the effects of long term migration to the U.K on a village called 'Talukpur' in Sylhet), I was invited to the British High Commission in Dhaka for a meeting. This would be really helpful to my research, I was told by the ex-pat who had arranged it without asking; the BHC had masses of data on kinship relations and migration histories in particular villages. This was during the period of family reunification, when many of the men who had come to the U.K in the 60s were now in the process of bringing their wives and children over. The process involved applying for settlement visas and was often long drawn out and complicated: not only were applicants subjected to long and detailed interviews in Dhaka, but the BHC had a practice of 'village visits', in which they would turn up unexpectedly in a village to check if

people really were who they said they were. Not surprisingly, many people in 'Talukpur' (not the village's real name) assumed that I was a British High Commission spy.

So, did I take up the BHC's offer of a meeting, in which we could exchange information about the inhabitants of Talukpur? Of course not. At that stage, it seemed crystal clear: to attend such a meeting would be to do exactly what I'd spent twelve or so months promising my friends in Talukpur that I would NEVER do: inform on them. After all, some had family members whose legal status in the U.K was somewhat blurry, so say the least. Many more had husbands, brothers and sons in the Middle East who were, to use the local phraseology, 'unlegal' (as opposed to travelling on the more expensive 'legal' work permits and passports). That I might be in a position to help those who had legitimate claims which were being denied by the BHC didn't occur to me.

Fast forward twenty years, and it's March 08 and I'm sitting in the air conditioned offices of Dfid, Dhaka, explaining that The Home Office's latest ruse to curtail immigration from Bangladesh (setting a language test for the Bangladeshi spouses of British citizens, many of whom are their cousins) will never work because the transnational links are so deeply embedded and enduring that would be brides and grooms at the Bangladeshi end will simply learn English to the required standard. It'll be a pain, and they'll have to spend money on the hundreds of language colleges which will spring up in the wake of the new legislation, but where there's a will, there's almost always a way, I say. The net result will be that a small minority of business minded people will profit further from the region's dependency on the UK whilst the families of people who have a right to live in Britain with their husbands and wives will have to shell out even more for the privilege. We all agree that the next time I'm in Dhaka, it would be great to meet with the immigration people at the British High Commission to discuss this further.

To what extent should anthropologists engage with agencies who explicitly seek to curtail immigration to Britain? If I were to go back twenty years, I would still refuse that 'information sharing' meeting with the BHC, yet to balk at a meeting to discuss more general policy related questions in 2008 seems ridiculous. Not only is it highly unlikely that the Home Office or BHC would take much notice of what I might say, but I am, after all, pointing out that Britain and Bangladesh have historical links which go back several centuries, that arranged marriage between places is a long standing tradition and not simply a 'migration strategy', and that all the policy will do is add to peoples' financial burden in paying for the language courses. Surely this is all to the good? Yet the niggling questions remain: in describing Sylhetis' on-going determination to come the U.K, will the view be reinforced that all applications, for marriage or tourist visas or asylum, are made by people who are, at heart, 'economic migrants'? And given that the anti immigration agenda is one that the current and future governments are only ever likely to strengthen, should pro-migration anthropologists such as myself even be entering into information sharing dialogues with those agencies whose job it is to put such policies into place?

By this point it should be obvious that ideologically I do not support this, or any other government's attempts to keep people out, especially if they come from ex colonial territories such as Bengal, which, after all, endured the presence of the British for hundreds of years. People have always moved, and so long as different places in the world remain obscenely unequal in terms of wealth and well being, they will continue to do so. To stop people moving out and in of Sylhet would be almost as difficult as trying to stop the clouds moving across the sky. Even were the most stringent laws applied, or a wall built around the region (not as preposterous as it sounds: India is currently building a wall along its borders with Bangladesh) people would continue to seek their livelihoods elsewhere, for places such as the U.K, the Gulf, Malaysia and Singapore – in fact, anywhere where there is the opportunity to earn money – have become an integral part of the local economy. More than this, foreign places are central to local hierarchy and culture: to be a 'Londoni' (ie someone who has settled in the U.K) is to be successful and cosmopolitan. Only the poorest go nowhere

(just like the U.K, really: odd how middle class Brits take international travel for granted, yet seek to deny people from elsewhere from similar privileges).

So does this make British-Bangladeshi transnational migration 'good' or 'bad'? The answer, not surprisingly, is that it depends on where one is located and who one is. From the vantage point of debates surrounding immigration to Britain I remain pro-migration. Here in Brighton I can only see gains in a diverse and open society. When I'm in Sylhet, however, my response is more ambiguous. This is not only because I'm doubtful that in terms of economic development the region has really benefited from the link to the U.K, but also because having visited Talukpur regularly for the past twenty years, I don't think that the poorest people in the village have benefited at all. It's true that there has been a huge injection of wealth into 'Londoni' villages. Large houses have been built by successful migrants, shopping malls have sprung up in booming regional towns, there's plenty of work for labourers from other, poorer regions, in the building trade or on the fields. As I and others have described elsewhere the largess and charity of Londonis provide a vital safety net for their poorer relatives in times of crisis, just as the employment opportunities provide an alternative livelihood for people from poorer areas of Bangladesh. Clearly, there are gains. All of these gains are, however, dependent on the maintenance of links to the U.K and the on-going willingness of subsequent generations of British Bengalis to support their relatives back in Sylhet. As Roger Ballard argued in the early 1980s with reference to Mirpur in Pakistan, migration to the U.K has led to a new form of dependency rather than 'development' in terms of investment in infra structure, social services, industry or agriculture. So long as the links with wealthy countries remain, and people want (and are allowed) to travel between places, perhaps this dependency is no better or worse than the dependency that any exporter has on its foreign markets. The only difference is that what is being exported is people rather than cheap clothes for Primark or shrimps.

But there are problems too. Given the stringent restrictions on immigration into richer countries, the market for Sylheti labour is highly unstable and, for those unable to access the security of a U.K settlement visa, often involves high risk strategies. In terms of the U.K connection, the situation is further complicated by the changing nature of the British based Bengali community, whose long term interest in their village houses, their land and the large numbers of close and distant kin who make claims on their charity will inevitably change over time. Language tests or not, some of those with links to British families will continue to refresh the links through marriage. Others, with less social and financial capital, will continue to risk their assets in attempts to access labour markets in the Middle East and South East Asia. For many this entails selling land or taking on large loans in order to pay for the necessary papers and travel costs; the unlucky ones lose everything when they are cheated by unscrupulous agents or caught by the police in Malaysia or Saudi, or wherever. Meanwhile, the poorest families I know in Talukur, who beside the odd goat or vegetable patch have no real assets and have never been able to afford a foreign passport or visa, remain as poverty-stricken as ever. I'm talking here about people who aren't always able to eat three meals a day. It's true that if they're lucky a Londoni relative will give them some charity to tide them over during a particularly bad patch but over the years none have fundamentally changed their economic position or become less dependent upon their patrons. Crucially, what people aspire to, what they dream of, plan for and invest in, is foreign countries, not Bangladesh.

These perspectives lead me to my final 'migration moment'. I'm in Talukpur, talking with the widowed matriarch of a middling income household. She has four sons, three of whom are now in the U.K (one went as a child, the other two married their cousins, for brevity and anonymity I shall call them X,Y and Z). Her property is now managed by her remaining son, Q. Q is making a name for himself locally as a 'contractor' of labour to a industrial site owned and managed by the U.S (another story …). None of the U.K based sons are able to send regular remittances these days. After all, they have their own young families to support and working as waiters in 'Indian' restaurants is neither particularly pleasant nor profitable. The youngest son, who has only been in the U.K for a short while, is currently doing two shifts in 24 hours, I'm told, and having

a horrible time. And yet, to my surprise, Q's mother tells me that they are currently trying to arrange a U.K marriage for Q. "But you said that X, Y and Z didn't send you any money … and Z is working 16 hours a day!" I exclaim. "If Q goes too, who will remain at home to look after you and your daughter and the land?"

She looks at me pityingly. I've always asked her stupid questions and today's no exception. "It's better for the family for them to be in London," she says patiently. "London is good."

My honest, knee jerk response to this? It's that 'London' isn't necessarily 'good', that like his brothers Q will have a harder time there than at home and it would be better for him to stay in the village, to continue to build his local business interests and manage the household assets. Also that in the long term, his ageing mother and divorced sister will need him to be physically around. And finally, that I don't want to sponsor him (or his uncle, or his various cousins, all of whom have made similar requests) to come on a tourist visa to the U.K, because the application process itself will cost thousands of taka that they can ill afford and I'm certain he'll be refused.

So does that make me pro or anti (im)migration? It's clearly a stupid question, because, as I've tried to show, not only is 'migration' no single thing and the answers depend on context. For Q and his mother the question is largely irrelevant. Whatever I say, foreign places, where money can be earned, and secure livelihoods built, remain vital. In the U.K the debates in blogs and newspapers will continue to rumble on, the Home Office will continue to devise new strategies to keep people out, and in Sylhet people will do whatever they can to maintain the links with the U.K.

Where does that leave anthropology? I suppose the obvious answer is that rather than coming up with simplistic 'solutions' it's our job to show complexity in the face of simplistic assumptions, to unsettle conventional myths, and to argue against policy makers and immigration officials whose job it is to close doors in peoples' faces. If the latter means tailoring our arguments according to context, so be it. What I write in an academic article, a policy briefing, or an asylum report is inevitably going to be different. Since migration is filled with such ambiguity and contradiction: ethically, making pronouncements on it, as if 'it' were ever any one 'thing', is a minefield. Yet despite the perils involved, these are debates in which anthropological voices badly need to be heard above the cacophony of those who understand very little, yet shout very loudly.

Posted by gardnerk on Tuesday, April 22, 2008, at 2:36 pm.

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