

Working Paper  
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**Place, Social Protection and Migration in Bangladesh:  
A Londoni Village in Biswanath**

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## Introduction

In this working paper, which is based on recent research in Biswanath, Sylhet (in Bangladesh) we take issue with generalised notions of 'social protection' common to development discourse. The context is a 'Londoni' village (i.e. a village with high levels of transnational migration to the UK). This has led to what appears to be an economic 'boom': new houses and businesses have proliferated, whilst villagers returning from the UK either for a holiday or longer periods are often lavishly generous, giving a great deal of 'help' to their village-based relatives, as well as other forms of charity to the local poor. Partly in response to the availability of work in Londoni villages, plus the more favourable employment conditions offered in them, there has been a high level of internal migration into the area by those whose livelihoods have either failed elsewhere, or who are reliant upon temporary migration as a wider livelihood strategy. Many of these internal migrants come from other districts of Bangladesh such as Mymensingh and Comilla. Others come from neighbouring non-Londoni districts.

At one level, it would seem that there can only be advantages for the poor when money flows from Britain to Sylhet. Given the duty of care that Bengali Muslims have to their 'own poor' (idealised in the notion of *jakat* or alms giving), the help provided by Londoni families (whether permanently in Britain, or partly resident in Bangladesh) in the guise of financial support, the distribution of food and clothing at ritual occasions, shelter, employment and access to land is an important dimension of the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable people in the village. In times of crisis -- flooding, illness, losing one's money to a fraudulent travel agent, or one of the many shocks that the vulnerable in Bangladesh habitually face -- such assistance may make the difference between survival and catastrophe. For these households, which do not own any assets and have no access to foreign countries and the profits that can be made there, their relationship to wealthier others are often the only form of insurance they have against total destitution.

Within the social protection literature, such relationships and the networks that they involve are often described as 'informal protective mechanisms' (c.f. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite 2003: 17), or 'informal safety nets' (Kabeer 2002: 5). Other analysts simply gloss them as 'social capital'<sup>1</sup>. Yet whilst generalised discussions of social protection provide an informative framework for

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of social capital theory with reference to Bangladesh, see Wood 2005; more generally, see Fine 2001.

consideration of pro-poor policy, they do not situate local institutions of social protection within the wider political economies in which they are embedded. Indeed, debates centred around both social capital and social protection have so far largely failed to engage with the classical anthropological discussions of patron-clientism which highlight not only 'the cultural and moral dimensions of hierarchy and reciprocity' (Wood 2005: 13), but also the forms of power that these relationships involve<sup>2</sup>.

In what follows, we shall attempt to assess not only the extent to which 'the poor' can and do receive '*shahajo*' (help) from wealthy *Londoni* households in Jalalgaon, but also the social and political meanings of such assistance. In so doing, we aim to interrogate the relationship between migration, poverty and social protection in an area of Bangladesh where the high levels of migration to Britain (or *London*, as it is locally termed) and other destinations in the Northern hemisphere are met by equally high levels of inwards migration by poorer individuals and families from elsewhere in Bangladesh. As we shall see, practices which provide the poor with a degree of social protection need to be contextualised within particular geographies of power and practice. As previous research into the relationship between patron-clientism and international migration in rural Bangladesh indicates<sup>3</sup>, social protection comes at a cost: in return for the *shahajo* of richer patrons, the poor have a variety of economic and political obligations, providing a constant supply of ready labour, political support and other services which are rarely made explicit. It is this that Wood has termed 'perverse social capital', a system of complex, overlapping obligations and reciprocity which is a key social resource for the poor, and which, contrary to most theories of social capital, has a positive correlation with the existence of poverty (Wood 2005).

In Biswanath, the region of Greater Sylhet in which our research was located, these forms of social protection have a particular relationship to place. Here, a key determinant in the amount of support or help that the poor can expect to receive from wealthy *Londoni* households is the degree to which they can or cannot be said to be related to them. This is measured both in terms of kinship, (either fictive or reckoned through actual blood links), and the physical distance of their place of origin from Biswanath. These degrees of separation in turn determine people's access to different places. It is these places, and their different income earning

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<sup>2</sup> For ethnographic examples of patron-clientism, see Gellner and Waterbury 1977; Michaelson 1976; Scott 1985; Hart 1991; Stiles 1991; de Neve 2000. The content of patron client relations in rural Sylhet is discussed in detail in Gardner's earlier work (1995: 150-159).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gardner 1995.

potentials, (not to say the social and economic resources that they represent<sup>4</sup>), which are key arbiters of power and survival in Sylhet.

As we shall see, within this context, activities and exchanges that might be described as 'social protection' exist on a continuum. One end of this continuum involves the generalised charity of ritual distributions, such as the distribution of meat to 'the local poor' at Qurbani Eid or at funerals, or the distribution of food at weddings. At the other are loans or donations of capital that pay for the recipient's migration to the Gulf, or to cover emergency medical costs. In our use of the term, we include any form of assistance which acts as a 'safety net' for those struggling with insecure incomes and livelihoods. Crucially, this involves social relationships between people who are in the role of givers and receivers. Within this definition we do *not* include the wider economic opportunities that boost the livelihoods of the poor. Whilst, as we shall see, the employment opportunities provided by wealthy 'Londoni' areas provide an alternative source of income for people whose livelihoods are no longer sustainable (and to that extent act as an economic 'safety net'), we believe that to include this in our definition of social protection endangers the term making it overly baggy: a 'do-it-all' phrase beloved of development agencies, but too vague and generalised to have much analytical bite. Thus, whilst migration into Londoni areas might be described as a 'livelihood strategy' for the poor, this needs to be analytically separated from the social protection that the in-migrants may or may not find once they get there.

The research on which the paper is based was funded by DFID's Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty. The project involved a year long study of a *Londoni* village (which for reasons of confidentiality we shall call Jalalgaon) in Biswanath Thana, Greater Sylhet. The village is located in the heart of Biswanath, a booming Londoni area only twenty minutes by bus from Sylhet Town. Our main objective in undertaking the research was to understand the intersecting dynamics of internal and overseas migration in the village. In doing this we hoped to explore the effects of long-term migration to Britain on poverty in the area. We were particularly interested in conducting research amongst the many incomers to the village: the inhabitants of its various 'colonies', male and female labourers working on both a permanent and temporary basis, and an array of itinerant and seasonal in-migrants, many of

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<sup>4</sup> For a useful discussion of the distinction between social capital and social resources, see Wood 2005. For a critique of social capital theory, see Fine 2001.

whom were escaping desperate poverty in other regions of Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>. In addition to our Biswanath research, many of the insights on which this paper is based come from our long standing research experience on issues of migration and rural poverty in Bangladesh.

Before returning to Biswanath and the central themes of the paper, what follows is a brief background on the history of migration in Sylhet.

### **On the Move in Sylhet**

As Tasneem Siddiqui (2003) points out, migration has been a livelihood strategy of East Bengalis for many centuries. Indeed, the territory of what in the colonial period was East Bengal, which in 1947 became East Pakistan, and only since the War of Independence in 1971 came to be 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 the other direction, a continual flow of people, regardless 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 (1999: 83-87) writes movingly that the country is 'an insecure environment, inhabited by insecure families.' Such families dream constantly of escaping insecurity. '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....' (ibid.).

Today, these fast-footed people are moving both internally (see, for example, Afsar 2000; Khan and Seeley 2005, Van Schendel 2005) and overseas, predominantly to the Gulf and to South East Asia (see, for example, Abrar 2000; Siddiqui 2003; Mahmood 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>6</sup>. Whilst some are middle class professionals, the vast majority of migrants are wage labourers, often

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<sup>5</sup> Much of the fieldwork was carried out by Rushida Rawnek Khan and Abdul Mannan. Methods included surveys, structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions. Additional research was also carried out in Biswanath Town and Sylhet Town.

<sup>6</sup> The Bangladesh government has banned women from certain categories of labour migration. They therefore officially only make up 1 percent of this figure (Siddiqui 2003)

inhabiting the most vulnerable and lowly paid sectors of the international labour market. Many more move illegally, and are thus not captured by official statistics. These migrants take huge risks in their attempts to access foreign remittances, and 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 many 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 percent of the British Bengali population is Sylheti in origin. From the nineteenth century onwards, Sylhetis worked on British ships leaving from Calcutta as *lascars* (sailors). Some of these men ended up in the docks of East London, where they jumped ship and searched for new livelihoods in London (for further details of this period, see Adams 1987; Choudhury 1993; Gardner 1995 and 2002).

There is no single reason why Sylhetis rather than other Bengali groups dominated ship work, or why it was they, rather than others who, many years later, were able to monopolise the 'labour voucher' system which brought people from ex-colonial territories to work in post-war Britain. One factor may have been the colonial system of land administration. Whilst over much of Bengal, *zamindars* (landlords, who paid taxes directly to the British) owned large tracts of land which were worked upon by their tenants (*raiyat*), until 1947 Sylhet was administered as part of Assam. Here, in contrast to the *zamindari* system, many smaller farmers were independent owner occupiers of land (*taluk dar*) rather than tenants on the large estates owned by *zamindars*. Possibly this contributed both to an entrepreneurial spirit as well as the capital reserves required to travel to Calcutta in search of ship work. Another factor may be the riverine geography of the region, which produced a population experienced in boats and shipping. Crucially too, particular individuals may have 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 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 Choudhury reports, an office of the British High Commission was opened specially in Sylhet (Choudhury 1993).



Most of the men who left for Britain in this period 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 relentless 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 their villages where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and community, as well as regional and national political activities.

Over the 1970s and into the 1980s conditions started to change. 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 established. Today, the Bangladeshi population is the youngest and fastest growing in Britain. The 2001 Census enumerated a total population of 283,063 of which 38 percent were under sixteen. Fifty four percent of the Bangladeshis live in London (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk><sup>7</sup>) and nearly half of these are situated in Tower Hamlets where they form over a quarter of the resident population. (In some areas within the borough, this figure is higher.)

Whilst there is still some movement and settlement back to Bangladesh from Britain, the character of transnationalism has therefore changed radically over the last few decades. The predominant form of migration to Britain is now through marriage, and visits 'back' to the *desh* may include children born in Britain who have never been there before. Whilst some households are still being reunited, the majority are now together in Britain. As we shall see, these changes in the character of the links may have important implications for the types of 'help' that those left behind receive.

From this brief history, let us turn to our research context: Jalalgaon village.

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<sup>7</sup> Website date: May 2006

## Jalalgaon Village

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 UK, 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 *nouveau 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 US 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 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 Londoni families, who after a few months returned to the UK.

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 our fieldwork, we counted 97 households that identified themselves as 'insiders', their families having lived in Jalalgaon for over two or three generations. Of these, 34 were known locally as 'Londonis', meaning that a member had migrated to the UK. Some were permanently absent in Britain, but others still had family members living in Jalalgaon. The remaining 63 'insider' households either had no migratory experience, or had sent members to the Middle East. In addition to these 97 '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 a household that over the generations has divided into separate households, and therefore usually consisting of

patrilineal kin) are 25 'colonies': thatch, breeze block and tin buildings, reminiscent of urban slum housing, which at the time of our survey held 147 households, a total of 750 people.

In addition to this is a population of temporary and permanent labourers, who live largely in the households of 'insiders', but who may also stay in the colonies. During our fieldwork we counted 169 labourers who originated from outside the village, living in 33 '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. We shall be returning to these in-migrants later in the paper.

There are other noteworthy features in the village. These include the village's bazaar, which is filled with shops selling not only fruit and vegetables, tea, spices and so on, but also offering mobile phone and internet services, as well as high status goods such as nappies, cosmetics and expensive snacks. Unlike less prosperous villages in which there would only be a dirt track, there are also a high number of metalled roads connecting homesteads (*baris*) and their fields to the main road. These have all been financed by Londoni money, as have many of the schools, health centres and community centres in the region. Strikingly too, many of the fields are bounded by high stone walls. These mark plots of land owned by absent Londonis. They are, quite literally, claims of entitlement made concrete, and are only found in areas of high out migration to Britain.

A large proportion of the agricultural land in the village is cropped only once a year. This is in striking contrast with the rest of Bangladesh, where (depending upon local ecology) the land is normally cultivated twice a year (during the *aman* and *boro* rice crops), often combined with a crop of winter vegetables (*rabi*). Some fields are not farmed at all, but lie fallow, waiting for the construction of buildings. Although precise data on land use was difficult to obtain, we calculated that approximately twenty acres of land in the centre of the village was, over the twelve months of our fieldwork, not being used for agricultural production but most likely awaiting property development. This indicates another major difference with the rest of rural Bangladesh. As we shall see in what follows, only a minority of villagers are dependent upon agriculture for their livelihoods.

The village is also marked by its rapidly escalating land prices. Depending on where the land is (for example, whether near a road or the market), purchasers can expect to pay between one

to three million taka for one kiare (approximately 0.3 acres). In one case a Londoni brought two kiare of prime building land for ten million taka (approx £82,659)<sup>8</sup>. This is comparable to prices one might expect to pay in the centre of Dhaka, and more expensive than Sylhet Town. In other districts of Bangladesh, an acre of land (around three kiare) would cost between 80,000-100,000 (one lakh) taka (approximately £826).

### Overseas Migration and Economic Status in Jalalgaon

To understand the processes that have produced these features, one needs to consider the relationship between migration and the shifting terrain of economic status in the village over the last fifty or sixty years. We do not have longitudinal data for Biswanath, but its history is likely to be similar to Talukpur, the Londoni village in Nobiganj studied by Gardner in the 1980s. Here, it was in the 1950s and 1960s that the pattern of migration to Britain became firmly established. Not all men took advantage of the so-called 'labour voucher' system. Those that did either had existing links with the UK through having relatives who were *lascars* (sailors), who had thus already established a foothold in Britain, or had sufficient capital to fund the passage to London, plus of course an interest in overseas migration. Not all land owning households sent migrants to Britain, but over the 1950s to 1970s, those that did not began to lose land to those that did. The wages earned in Britain amounted to small fortunes in the Sylheti context and with them Londoni migrants began to buy up as much land as they could afford in order to secure their livelihoods in Sylhet, where most assumed they would eventually return. As competition over the finite amount of land grew, prices rose. This meant that within a few decades, those that did not have access to foreign wages were increasingly unable to afford local land. By now, however, the doors to Britain were closing. Without being a dependent of a British citizen, it was becoming almost impossible to migrate there. A new hierarchy, which continues in ever more exaggerated forms today, was thus established, in which those with access to Britain were the winners and those without, the losers.

This history is reflected in Jalalgaon today. As mentioned above, of the 97 households permanently present in the village (excluding the 'outsider' colony inhabitants, none of whom own land in the area), 34 are 'Londonis'. Another seven households are, using local terminology, classified as 'Dubai', meaning that they have had experience of migration to the

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<sup>8</sup> These rates are based on currency conversion at the time of writing, in October 2006 (when £1 = 120 taka). See <http://www.oanda.com/convert/classic>.

Gulf. Of these, three have been moderately successful and own some land. The remaining 57 households have no members abroad, and have been classified by us as 'non-migrant insiders.' When landholding in the village is correlated to these household types, the results speak for themselves. Of the total agricultural land in Jalalgaon, 79 percent is owned by Londoni households, 6.9 percent by 'Dubai' households and 13.9 percent by non-migrant insiders. Put another way, 100 percent (34) of Londoni households own land, alongside 50 percent (6) of Dubai households, and 10 percent (6) of non-migrant insider households.

When we examine the amounts of land owned, the figures are even more striking. Of the non-migrant insiders, one household owns five kiare (nearly two acres), and the rest one kiare or less (i.e. less than 0.3 acres). Amongst the Londoni households, whilst 23.5 percent own up to one acre, and 26.47 percent own between one to two acres, the rest own over 2 acres, with 23.5 percent owning over 5 acres.

In sum, migration overseas is matched by the accumulation of land and property, with a clear hierarchy between places. In this, those migrating to Britain have gained a great deal more than those migrating to the Middle East. Of those who have had no direct connection with a foreign place, none have been able to accumulate much land, and none are able to afford today's extortionate prices. It is hardly surprising that the aspirations of most young men in the village focus upon going abroad, with 'London' (the UK) being the most favoured destination.

### **Land, Work and In-Migration to Jalalgaon**

As indicated above, the outwards movement of villagers to Britain and the Middle East has been matched by significant migration of poorer people *into* Jalalgaon. This is linked to local conceptions of work, agriculture and land, as well as economic conditions in other parts of Bangladesh. As our data shows, the reasons for these movements are varied, and depend in part on the type of migration that has taken place. For some seasonal and permanent labourers, for example, movement to Jalalgaon can be understood as a positive livelihood strategy. Like the seasonal agricultural labourers described by Rogaly et al (2002) and Rogaly and Rafique (2003) in West Bengal or Mosse et al (2002) in Western India, movement between places can be interpreted as one strategy amongst others in a range of livelihood options which come into play at particular times of the agricultural season or household development cycle. In other

cases movement to Jalalgaon is a response to hunger and deprivation, the result of a failure of social protection in the place of origin (Khan and Seeley 2005: 109-124).

Who are the in-migrants, and why do they come? In order to unravel the complex and continually shifting situation that we found in Jalalgaon, we need to examine Sylheti constructions of status and social mobility, as well as the environmental and economic realities of agricultural production in Sylhet. As we shall see, land, and the way in which it is used, is a key factor.

As noted above, a large proportion of land in Jalalgaon is left fallow over much of the year. There are two interlinked reasons. The first is that landowners can make a great deal more money from land if it is used for colonies, or other forms of property development. The second is that, given the in-puts of labour required and in comparison with the transformative potential of overseas remittances, agriculture is not sufficiently profitable for large scale investment. This is particularly so when land is sharecropped out by absent owners. The effort and 'hassle' involved in ensuring that the harvest is divided properly, and that the absent owner not cheated, are generally seen as 'not worth it' by Londoni owners. If the sharecroppers are related (as they often are: see our data below), family tensions may arise if the arrangement goes wrong. If the land is not sharecropped but farmed by household members in the village, then labour costs are so high as to make profit difficult. Crucially, cultivating land is locally perceived as a low status occupation, a far cry from the modernity and progress embodied by returning Londonis, with their ready cash and lavish ritual distributions. Indeed, in Jalalgaon the term *abadi*, which translates as 'agricultural labourer' is used only in reference to the lowest status members of the village, the colony dwellers, whilst in Talukpur the term *raiyyat* (tenant of agricultural land in the colonial *zamindari* system) was used as a term of abuse, as was the description of someone as being an 'earth cutter'.

Thus, whilst Londoni households may own a great deal of land, its prime purpose is no longer agricultural production, on which the livelihood of the household depends. Instead, these households are either located in Britain (and thus earning incomes in Britain) or, if members of the household are still living in the village, pursue a mixed livelihood in which agriculture (performed either by sharecroppers or hired labour) is only one aspect. For these households, business interests, remittances from Londoni relatives and wage earning in the Middle East are now of more central importance.

It is not only amongst the more prosperous Londoni households that the retreat from agriculture can be observed. Of non-migrant insider households, 84.21 percent are no longer directly involved in cultivating land, but have moved to other forms of income generation such as selling goods in the bazaar, working as labourers in construction, driving vehicles and so on. Of the six non-migrant insider households that own land, three sharecrop their fields out for others to cultivate, and nine insider non-migrant households (15.7 percent) sharecrop land in from Londoni relatives.

### *In-coming Labourers*

Due to labour shortages caused both by the absence of potential labour abroad, plus the resident population's unwillingness to work on the land, there is thus great demand for in-migrant labour. This consists both of permanent labourers, who may also be caretakers of empty Londoni houses, and seasonal labourers, who come to the village at harvest time. Given the constant movements of people in and out of the village, and the seasonal variations, it is not possible to provide hard and fast figures on the total number of labourers in the village. As mentioned above, during our fieldwork we counted 169 labourers (*kamla*) in 33 households. Three of the richest households employed over ten labourers. Of this figure, 40 labourers were permanent (defined as being employed for a year or more). Twenty seven of this permanent group were men, and thirteen women. All had arranged with their employers that they will stay for a year or more. The men were paid between 15-20,000 taka a year. Women were paid much less and tend to be employed on a more casual basis, with a monthly wage of 300 taka a month, plus board and lodging being the norm. None of the permanent labourers had much bargaining power with their *malik* ('owner', or employer), but instead had developed quasi-kinship relations with them, often being referred to as *mama* (maternal uncle). As we shall see, these labourers tended to come from areas geographically close to Biswanath, and their relationships with their employers could be classified as those between a patron and client.

According to the time of year, there are also other temporary labourers in the village. Some of these come to help with the harvest, and, like the West Bengali agricultural labourers described by Rogaly et al. (2002), are hired in groups by *sadars* (labour gang masters). Others are involved in the construction business, and can be found in the village during the dry months when most houses are built. All have been attracted by the employment opportunities in the area, as well as the high wages. Our data shows that seasonal labourers can be paid between

80-100 taka a day, including board and lodging, for their work. This compares with around 70 taka a day in Dinajpur, and 60-70 taka a day in Shunamganj. This payment may be supplemented by a small portion of the crop, which the labourers carry back to their homes. Construction workers can be paid up to 250 taka a day, depending upon their skills. Again, they are attracted into Londoni areas due to the high level of employment opportunities.

Many of the seasonal labourers aim to build up a relationship of trust with employers, and will return to the same household year after year. The majority come from Shunamganj, a low lying and relatively poor region of Greater Sylhet which becomes inundated with water during the wet season, meaning that besides fishing, there is little work for its inhabitants. Significantly, it is during this annual inundation that the harvest in Biswanath takes place. During our discussions with this group of migrants, all mentioned the availability of work in Jalalgaon, and the favourable terms of employment as the significant factors affecting their migration decision. Their employment in the village was just one activity in a diverse range of livelihood strategies; many also owned some land in Shunamganj, or were sharecroppers. Mobile phones were making a difference too. Now, when the *dhan* (paddy) was ready for harvesting, Biswanath employers could simply call the labourers up. We shall be returning to the terms of employment that temporary labourers working in both construction and agriculture have with their *malik* later in the paper. For now, however, let us turn to the other group of in-migrants in the village, the colony inhabitants.

### *Colony Inhabitants*

Unlike agriculture, in which labour has to be hired, and in which the eventual product brings only limited profit (especially if the land is sharecropped), a colony can be immensely profitable to its owner. One landlord gave us the following example: from one kiare of land, one might expect to make 6,000 taka in four months, if all the produce was sold. From the same piece of land a twenty-room colony would bring 10,000 taka a month. For landowners, it is therefore far more profitable to build colonies than engage in agriculture. In addition, people living in the colony provide an instant market for local traders. Several businessmen in the village's bazaar area told us that they were reliant on selling their goods to colony people. Significantly, most of the colonies are built near the bazaar and / or the road that leads out of the village. Viewed as outsiders, their inhabitants are generally discussed in negative terms by villagers, who argue that they are 'dirty' and bring crime and deviance to the village.



Over our year-long fieldwork, colony households were in constant flux. Just as some people arrived, others would leave, either returning to their home villages, or moving elsewhere. During some months, for example, some of the smaller colonies would be completely empty. In the harvesting and building seasons, they would fill up again. There was also a wide variety in the background of the inhabitants. In contrast to the agricultural labourers, who predominantly came from Shunamganj or other nearby regions in Greater Sylhet, the majority came from further afield. Out of the 147 households that were present during our fieldwork, 10 came from elsewhere in Biswanath, 60 from Greater Sylhet, and the rest originated from areas outside Sylhet, such as Mymensingh, Netrokona, Bhoirob, Comilla and Barishal. The majority had moved due to calamities and poverty in their 'sending' areas. Our survey data shows that 'push' factors, such as hunger (58.5 percent), flooding (5.4 percent), indebtedness (8.2 percent) and family conflict (5.4 percent) were the major reasons for moving, whilst 'wanting a better life' was only given as the main reason by 15.6 percent of our informants. These categories are of course not exclusive. They also reflect the shocks experienced by individual households (caused, for example, by the death of a wage earner, or sudden land loss) as well as the long term, or seasonal deprivation experienced in some regions of Bangladesh, where seasonal variations in agricultural production and other income earning opportunities contribute to what is known as '*monga*' (seasonal famine, usually occurring from September to October).

Just as the majority of colony inhabitants have moved due to shocks in the areas from which they have come (in contrast to the labourers, whose migration is predominantly a long established part of their livelihood rather than a response to a sudden shock), most have arrived in the village with few existing social links. We found that out of 147 households, 36 (24 percent) came to Jalalgaon with no previous links to the village. Others had links with neighbours or relatives already living in a colony, but none had kinship links with village 'insiders'. Once in Jalalgaon, the men follow a variety of occupations, including pulling rickshaws, working as day labourers, driving 'vans', or working as petty traders. Women largely work as servants (*boa beti*) or petty traders.

To assume that these households reside 'permanently' in Jalalgaon would be a mistake. Instead, people move in and out of the village according to necessity. Links with home villages remain strong. Nearly all the colony residents attempted to keep in contact with their relatives in their villages of origin, with 38 percent reporting to us that they return 'frequently'. Some people

return annually to their home villages for two or three months. Others return every few years. Others use the economic opportunities available in Jalalgaon as a cushion for the habitual shocks that they face in their home areas, and only come to the colonies during periods of acute scarcity in their villages of origin. Only those escaping debt are less likely to return.

For many of the colony inhabitants migration is therefore a short or longer term strategy to escape destitution in other parts of Bangladesh. To this extent wealthy Londoni villages can be said to act as 'safety nets' for the poor in other, less prosperous parts of Bangladesh, providing economic opportunities and shelter for them when times become particularly hard. Their movement into Biswanath is, in turn, combined with constant efforts to maintain social resources in the areas from which they have come, for, as we shall see, the social protection offered from insider Jalalgaon households is of a limited nature.

What this short account of in-migrant groups in Jalalgaon shows is that the village is in a process of rapid transformation and flux. Unlike the stable villages conjured up in classical South Asian ethnography<sup>9</sup>, people are highly mobile. Few live only in one location, and the vast majority depend, in one way or another, upon a place other than their 'home' for their livelihood. Location is central for the construction of status and hierarchy, too. In the hierarchical arrangement of different places, 'London' and other countries in the 'West' are at the top, followed by 'Dubai'. After this comes Biswanath, then other areas of Greater Sylhet (for example, Shunamganj). At the bottom are places outside Sylhet, which (like the international destinations at the top) might be thought of by village insiders as *bidesh* (far away, foreign).

Crucially, peoples' relationships to these various places<sup>10</sup> are vital for their relative security and/or vulnerability. In essence, the more one is able to access the places higher up the hierarchy, the more secure one's livelihood and the greater the degree of social protection available. Place and social protection are thus inextricably linked. One's access to place is, however, mediated by one's relationship to others. In what follows we shall return to our central theme: the care and 'help' provided by the rich to different groups of 'poor' in Jalalgaon. Before this, however, a word about the formal institutions of social protection in the village.

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<sup>9</sup> See Inden (1990) for a critique of the anthropological construct of the stable Indian village.

<sup>10</sup> Peoples' relationships to places are not of course all the same. For example, a colony inhabitant from Comilla would not think of his or her home village in the same way as a Jalalgaon insider.

## Formal Mechanisms of Social Protection and Availability of Credit

There are no state sponsored relief programmes for the poor in Biswanath, and no forms of social security are available for them. Three non-government organisations do have a presence in Jalalgaon, however. These are CARE and BRAC, both of which run literacy projects for colony inhabitants, and the Grameen Bank. The latter organisation is, of course, a major source of credit for the poorest households in Bangladesh, making small loans to an estimated 5.6 million people, nearly all of whom are women<sup>11</sup>. In Jalalgaon, however, only two households, both living in a colony, had taken a loan from the Bank during 2005. Indeed, Sonali Bank, another major source of credit in other parts of the country, told us that its local branch (which served Jalalgaon and two other adjacent villages) had only lent out three lakh (300,000 taka = approx £2500) in the past year. Although there were long queues outside the bank every morning, these were not made up of people needing credit, but Londonis collecting remittances and pensions.

Rather than the Grameen or Sonali Bank, it is this source of funds that poorer people in the village depend upon for credit. During our fieldwork, 80 people in the village collected British pensions (usually old-age pensions, sometimes widow's pensions). These amounted to around ten to twelve thousand taka a month, a vast amount of money by local standards. Most pensioners would, in turn, give a proportion of this money away to their poorer relatives, or use it to help fund building or business projects, weddings, or the further migration of members of the lineage. What started out as 'formal social protection' in the form of a British state pension, is thus invested into the social resources and status of the pensioner, who provides informal credit or 'help' for those without direct access to Britain. To understand this further, let us delve more deeply into local ideologies of care and protection within the area.

## Our Own Kin: Ideologies of Care and Protection in Jalalgaon

Social protection in Biswanath is directly related to local ideologies of relatedness and obligation common to Bangladesh. At the most general level all Bengali Muslims are subject to ideals of *Jakat*, the duty of care to the poor, as expressed through distributions of ritually slaughtered meat on holy days, funerals or other ritual occasions. Importantly, this injunction to

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/GBGlance.htm>

charity stresses that one should first and foremost give alms to one's 'own poor'. During a Londoni's trip back to their home village, for example, he or she would first and foremost be expected to provide 'help' for those in their lineage, followed by others who are more loosely related, and then, finally, offer charity to unconnected poor people, or beggars<sup>12</sup>.

From this level of charity, in which there need be no direct relationship with recipients, obligations to provide help build up according to the closeness of the connection. Whilst in some instances this may be measured in terms of actual kinship relationships, in others, degrees of relatedness are constructed over time and calculated according to where it is that people originate from. One's relationship to place, as well as who one knows (the two are inextricably linked) are therefore central social resources in accessing forms of protection and / or livelihoods that are key for survival amongst the poor. To explain this in more detail, let us turn to the dynamics of relatedness in Sylhet, and in particular, to the household development cycle.

As documented in Gardner's earlier work<sup>13</sup>, social norms in rural Bangladesh stress one's obligations and duty (*dyto*) to kin. Whilst stereotypically described as a 'patrilineal' society (Aziz 1979), in reality these obligations are also reckoned matrilaterally. Although women move to their husbands' households at marriage and in principle have duties first and foremost to their in-laws, in practice both men and women tend to remain in close contact with maternal kin and, in extremis, would also feel morally obliged to help them. This sense of obligation also extends to the larger *gusti* (patrilineage), many of whom would normally be living in the same village, or nearby. Whilst the number of specific kinship terms in use in the Sylhet region indicates a precise reckoning of kinship relationships, after a few degrees of separation, the actual link to a relative may become somewhat vague. Distant cousins are simply known as '*sassa-to-bai*', and one's father's many cousins as '*sassa*'. What matters is that these relatives are members of one's father's or mother's *gusti*, and are thus 'our own kin'.

Despite the success of the vast majority of Londoni households in accumulating wealth and status in Bangladesh, research in both Jalalgaon and Talukpur shows that not all members of the *gustis* from which the migrants came shared this good fortune. Gardner's earlier work in

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<sup>12</sup> Beggars (*fakir*) who move from house to house in search of alms are usually rewarded by a small bowl of husked rice (*chaal*) which they tie into the ends of their saris or lunghis.

<sup>13</sup> Gardner, 1995

Talukpur clearly shows that in the earlier decades of migration to the UK, there were both winners and losers within the same *gusti*. Whilst in the first phases of migration to the docks of Calcutta and, more recently, to the factories of post-war Britain, movement took place through chains in which it was the support of brothers, cousins and neighbours who had already journeyed abroad which enabled others to leave their villages, not all the men of each *gusti* or household, went abroad. Differences in household organisation, individual preference or the amount of capital available for funding a young man to migrate, as well as the degrees of separation from the migration chain, meant that certain sections of lineages tended to send many more migrants abroad than others. The rapid accumulation of wealth into the hands of Londonis documented by Gardner in Talukpur in the 1980s and evidenced by our current work in Biswanath, means that today there can be striking differences in wealth amongst different households within the same *gusti*.

In Talukpur, for example, across the fields from the stone house of a *bari* of four brothers, of whom three went to Britain in the 1960s, is the dilapidated thatched house of their distant cousins who survive through casual labour, begging, and the *shahajo* of their wealthy Londoni kin. Unlike the majority of the *gusti*, these cousins never migrated to the UK. They have subsequently not been able to gain access to 'London'. Whilst one daughter has married a Middle Eastern migrant, they own no land or assets and survive off the wage labour of their brothers. Another distant cousin, who was married to a *Londoni* who was killed in Britain in the early 1970s (and who has been unable to receive a widow's pension as his papers, and thus her ability to prove her connection to him, were seized by unscrupulous relatives) lives in abject poverty with her divorced daughter on the other side of the river. For her, as well as her cousins across the fields, survival depends upon the degree to which she can claim *shahajo* from her Londoni relatives.

Combined with the varied histories of upwards and downwards mobility of different sections of *gustis*, there may be significant economic differences within *baris*. In general all *baris* originated from one household, in which brothers lived together with their parents, and their income, labour and assets were pooled. At the death of parents, households are normally separated both physically through the construction of a bamboo wall, and economically, by a division of whatever land and assets were originally held jointly. Thus, over the generations households in which one or two brothers originally migrated to Britain have separated. Once the wives and

children of the original migrants move to Britain,<sup>14</sup> British-based brothers and their children have no immediate obligation to support their Bangladesh-based siblings, since their households are now separate units.

This means that there can be considerable economic differences within the same *bari*. In one *bari* in Talukpur, for example, two brothers settled with their children in Oldham in the 1970s. Both brothers are now dead, but their families remain in the UK. Whilst not wealthy by British standards, these families are able to access the social protection offered by the British state to its citizens in the form of pensions, council housing and other benefits. Meanwhile their younger brother has never moved further than Sylhet town. Now an old man, his household has managed to send one son to Britain through marriage to his paternal cousin. Despite this, the household struggles to profit from the small amount of land they own and the absent brothers' fields which they sharecrop. Their British-based son is unable to send much by way of remittances: he has a wife and a small child to support, and has so far met with little success in the restaurant trade.

From this brief description of differentiation within *gustis* and *baris*, let us return to the question of the types of help given to different categories of people within Jalalgaon and Talukpur.

### Support Given to Kin

What degree of support might these close relatives expect from their Londoni kin? Our research in Talukpur and Jalalgaon indicates that migrants who have settled in Britain and elsewhere only send regular remittances to their own households (wives and children, or parents)<sup>15</sup>. Once households have been separated, close relatives such as brothers, sisters and direct nephews and nieces of both matrilineal and patrilineal reckoning are 'helped' if and when particular needs arise and according to the circumstances of the Londoni relatives. Wedding costs, setting up a business, or overseas migration usually take place with the help of Londoni kin. Out of sixteen men involved in small businesses in the Biswanath area that we interviewed, for example, ten mentioned that they had been assisted in setting up their businesses (usually shops) by close relatives settled in Britain. Whilst in some cases the

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<sup>14</sup> This process generally took place over the 1970s and 1980s and is now largely complete. See Gardner 2002 and 2006.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that remittances are an extremely sensitive topic and obtaining data on them is difficult. Our observations are thus not based on 'hard' quantitative data but on what informants were willing to divulge.

relatives were brothers, in others they were uncles (both paternal and maternal). Of the many young men in Jalalgaon who are hoping to go abroad, all anticipate the assistance of close relatives already in Britain in organising marriages with British Bangladeshi brides. In another example, which shows how obligations involve both maternal and paternal kin, a young married woman, who has recently joined her husband (who is also her maternal cousin) in Britain is currently funding the law degree of her younger brother in Dhaka.

If households have divided such assistance is not guaranteed, and depends upon the maintenance of good relations between Britain and Bangladesh. If, over the time and distance that separates family members, relations turn sour, Bangladesh-based kin may find that support is withdrawn. In a context in which for the second and third generations in Britain there may be a waning interest in Bangladesh as the 'homeland', it is thus very much in Bangladesh-based kin's interest to make sure that the relationship is kept going. One way of doing this (and of enabling the migration of a son or a daughter) is through the arrangement of marriages between cousins based in Bangladesh and Britain. If this can be satisfactorily carried out, the links between different sections of the family are reinforced and the primary migration of a bride or groom becomes possible. The expectations of family members concerning prospective marriages (and the pressure which Bangladeshi kin sometimes put on their British-based cousins and uncles) can, however, lead to rifts. For example, Mr Mohabat, a Biswanath businessman, told us how his household had fallen out with his Britain-based uncle and aunt over the arrangement of a marriage between his brother and his British cousin. Whilst he and his brothers were keen for the marriage to take place, both the aunt and her daughter resisted the alliance, arguing that a Sylheti groom would not be suitable for a British-born girl. Allegations of the misappropriation of money quickly followed and today the British-based wing of the family no longer provides any form of support to their Sylheti kin<sup>16</sup>.

The following case study illustrates how far the help of Londoni relatives can extend to those left behind. As it also shows, maternal kin can be as important as those on one's father's side. Mrs Julekha explained to us how when her father died, her mother and sisters were taken by her maternal uncle to his home in Jalalgaon. Another uncle was already established in Britain. He arranged his sister's daughters' marriages, and when he had built himself and his brothers a new house from his British earnings, gave his sister the older one to live in. He also arranged

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the movement of South Asian grooms to Britain, see Charsley 2005; Shaw 2001; and Gardner 2006.

for Mrs Julekha's brother to migrate to the Middle East, and still sends money to his sister and her daughters.

As the above examples show, access to 'London' comes through relationships with relatives who are already established there. The dependence of would-be migrants on the help of relatives who have access to a foreign country extends to those hoping to go to the Middle East. For those planning to go to 'Dubai', loans or 'help' from Londoni relatives are often key to financing the journey and the 'papers' involved.<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to the input of capital for migration or business projects, some people in Jalalgaon who are related to Londonis sharecrop their land. As noted above, only 15.78 percent of non-migrant insider households are still actively engaged in agriculture (a total of nine). Unlike other parts of Bangladesh, where sharecropping arrangements are strictly adhered to<sup>18</sup>, in Biswanath this is not the case. Instead, relatives may keep most of the harvest, or be given some fields to grow vegetables on; strict accounting is not usual.

Besides these sharecropping arrangements, we have documented numerous examples of Londoni kin 'helping' members of their lineages back in Jalalgaon. This help involves sending money, helping to build or repair houses, sending assistance if a household member falls ill or dies, in times of flood, or for wedding expenses. Such 'help' is not confined only to closer members of the *gusti* but may spill out to other, more distantly related poor households and, as we saw in the opening paragraphs of this paper, include those who are not related at all. Significantly, the obligation to give such help, and the form that it takes, becomes increasingly diffuse with the waning strength of the kinship connection. For example, on returning to Talukpur, the first-named author, Katy, is expected by the poorer members of the village to provide 'help' in the form of cash. Decisions over how much to give to who are closely monitored by her relatively better off hosts. Larger amounts of money are dispensed to those with whom the relationship is closest; people who are outside the web of kinship relations (which is reckoned matrilineally as well as patrilineally) get smaller, more token amounts.

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<sup>17</sup> As research in both Talukpur and Jalalgaon shows, a high proportion of would be migrants to the Middle East are unsuccessful, either losing their money to fraudulent agents, entering the countries illegally and being deported, or failing to find enough work to repay the initial costs of the papers. In Jalalgaon, out of six 'Dubai' households, three had suffered a net loss in land and assets after their attempts to migrate.

<sup>18</sup> Normally this would involve all inputs being provided by the sharecropper, and the harvest divided equally between sharecropper and owner.



The following cases show the extent to which poorer, non-migrant 'insiders' in Jalalgaon are helped by their Londoni kin. As the second case illustrates, many believe that this help will eventually involve them being 'brought' to the UK, a dream which in reality is unlikely to materialise.

Mr 'T' is a day labourer with his wife, two daughters and one son. Two daughters are studying in junior school and the youngest son is at primary school. His uncle, cousins and other lineage members live in London. As he says: 'We are directly supported by our migrant relatives. The house where we live was bought by my uncle. Last year, it was badly damaged by a flood. As the house was made of bamboo and thatch, this year my uncle and cousins made it pacca (stone). Actually they could not tolerate our miserable condition. This year, they visited us and asked me not to work as a labourer any more. My uncle advised me to start a business and assured me he would send money once he got back to London. We are also highly supported by other rich people in the village. For example, the formal UP chairman, who is not my relative, has sharecropped out two kiars of land to me, but doesn't claim his share'.

Mr Shah, who owns a duck farm told us:

My brother, uncle and cousins live in London. I sharecrop my uncle's land which is approximately ten kiare. My uncle receives half of the share. I also grow some winter vegetables which are not sharecropped. My uncle lets me have all the produce. When I need help, my Londoni relatives always give it to me. For example, they've built me a house for my 40 ducks. My cousin who lives in London, has also promised to bear my kids' educational expenses. They also promised me that one day they will bring my kids to London.

Whilst we might interpret this 'help' as a form of 'social protection', it is also important to analyse how it is embedded within local power relations. Wood (2005: 13-14) is correct in stating that there is a sense of duty amongst richer people to offer assistance to the poor, and that to be labelled 'uncaring' carries social stigma within rural Bangladesh. But as he also makes clear, these reciprocal relationships are not weighted equally. In Talukpur 'our own poor' were prevented from falling into absolute destitution by their richer relatives, but were also treated as a source of labour whenever need arose and in which the terms of employment were very much dictated by the richer relatives. For example in Talukpur, poor (i.e. landless and non-migrant) female cousins might be called upon to come to the *bari* of their richer relatives to help with housework if there were extra guests to feed. They would not be classified as *boa beti*

(housemaids) for this would be to confer on them a low status, but instead their work would be described as 'helping out'. In return they might get a meal, or a small amount of *chaal* (husked rice). First in line for charitable handouts, these women are dependent upon the maintenance of good relations with their better-off relatives, and will go to any length to ensure that no one forgets that they are members of the same *gusti*. All exchanges, whether of labour or goods, are glossed as 'help'. Within ideologies of kinship and the support due to relatives, the terms cannot, therefore, be negotiated or challenged.

The wealthy therefore have a great deal of implicit power over their poorer relatives. An example of this comes from the life story of a female labourer who was working in Talukpur during Katy's last visit (October 2006). The reason she had migrated into the village, she explained, was because she could not be seen by the elders of her lineage to be employed by non-related houses in her home area, as this would create shame for the whole group. She had therefore travelled twenty or so miles to find employment in an area where no one would recognise her. In a similar vein, a shop owner in Jalalgaon told us that he had been set up in business by his Londoni relatives, because they did not want him to be seen labouring in the fields for the shame this brought to their lineage.

In Jalalgaon it is common to find poorer relatives acting as caretakers for the empty houses of absent Londonis. The role of caretaker is higher status than working as a *kamla* (permanent labourer, see below) and also brings a (well built) roof over one's head. It can, however, lead to problems if the property is damaged or when the Londonis return to the village and want their caretaker kin to move out. Increasingly Londonis are employing outsider caretakers, with whom they have a strictly business relationship. As this indicates, whilst kinship may bring a degree of social protection it also prevents the content of the reciprocity from being contested, for to do so would be to contradict the moral obligations embedded in the relationship. Relatedness thus brings social protection for the poor, but is also a way in which the rich maintain their power over them. Such is the nature of patron-clientism. To understand the meanings this has for the in-migrants to Jalalgaon, let us turn to the various categories of labourers in the village.

## Connectedness and Patronage: In-migrants in Jalalgaon

### *Permanent Labourers*

As already indicated, just over half the 40 permanent labourers (*kamla*) living in Jalalgaon come from areas within Greater Sylhet. Of these, 15 come from Jalalgaon or from villages adjacent to it. Eight come from Shunaganj, a poorer, non Londoni area of Sylhet which has for many generations supplied Biswanath with labour, and two from another Sylheti district called Chatak. The remaining 15 come from areas such as Noakhali, Comilla and Mymensingh (other districts in Bangladesh). Villagers told us that they prefer to hire labourers from inside Greater Sylhet for these people are 'more honest'. Since permanent labourers may work for a particular household for many years, it is important that relationships of trust develop. Besides working in the fields, they may also have major responsibilities in managing land and other property, feeding domestic animals, shopping and so on. Female *kamla* also work permanently within some households, doing domestic labour or, in some cases, managing empty properties as caretakers.

The relationship between permanent labourers and their employers contain many elements of patron-clientism. Male *kamla*, for example, may be referred to in kinship terms as *mama* (maternal uncle) by household children or *biye* (brother) by adults. Although they are paid an annual wage (which is high in comparison to other districts in Bangladesh), the rate of this is not negotiable in the first instance: employers decide what to give according to how pleased they are with the labourers' work. Only after he has been working for a household for a number of years might he feel able to ask for a wage increase. In contrast, the women we interviewed reported that they did not know how much they would be paid until the wage was given, and would not speak to their employers directly about remuneration. In return for their honesty and work, permanent *kamla* can expect a degree of protection from their employers. If sick, for example, they may be given treatment and time off, and would be allowed to return home for holidays or during a family crisis. Their *malik* (employer) might also give them loans, or other forms of financial support. None of these exchanges are formalised in a contract. Instead, they are the 'expected' benefits of permanent employment.

In the following cases, we can see how permanent *kamla* develop patron-client relations with their employers over time and are thus subject to variable levels of social protection. Whilst none are treated as blood kin, neither are they complete 'outsiders'.

Rumon Ali has been working in Jalalgaon as a permanent *kamla* for the last twenty years. In the house where he works, most but not all of the members are in Britain. Whilst originally he worked in the fields, land is now sharecropped out so he is mostly involved with the management of the empty house and overseeing the sharecrop arrangement rather than carrying out the labour himself. As he told us: 'My salary is not fixed, but I receive about 20,000 taka a year. Whenever I need help from my employers, I get it from them. I never ask about my salary. When I was first working here I used to get about 8-10,000 taka, but over time the wages have been raised. So I don't bargain. It is up to the employers to fix the rate. If I want to go back to Golopganj, I can go, but first I have to make sure that there's someone to look after this house, as I can't leave it empty. Sometimes I help in the telephone shop owned by my employer. My employer, Assador Mama (uncle) got married in Golopganj, so he's now my kin.

As this case shows, Rumon Ali is keen to create a fictive kinship link with his employer. He is also wary of disrupting the amiability of the relationship by negotiating directly for his wages, and thus 'never asks' about his salary. This is a good example of the patron-client relations that underlie what might otherwise be labelled 'social protection'. Whilst Rumon Ali's relationship with his 'mama' provides him with some degree of insurance against sickness or other crises, it is always provisional, and always reliant upon the good will of his 'mama'. The same issue is highlighted in the following comments, made by Hosna Begum who works with her father as the permanent servant of another Londoni family. Again, wages are never directly negotiated:

I'm from Kishoregonj (near Mymensingh). First I worked in Dhaka as a housemaid, then my father got a job here and was asked to bring me here so I could help with the housework. Now I help my father with the farming, as he has to manage all the agricultural activities. My father receives 14,500 taka a year, but I don't know what I'll get. Whatever the employers give, I'll be happy to receive it.

As the final example indicates, the extent to which permanent *kamla* can call upon Londonis to provide them with support depends upon the extent to which they can forge ongoing

relationships with them. As this case shows, if one's patron dies, the support that they provided goes with them.

Mrs Parol was working as the caretaker of a Londoni's house. Her employer had agreed that he would provide for all her needs so long as she acted as his caretaker. He had even agreed to bring her to London. But on his death, this agreement has become blurred. Her employer's sons and daughters treat her simply as a *bua beti* (maidservant), and she can no longer use the facilities in the house that were once hers. The management of land, which was once done by her, has now been taken over by her deceased employer's grandson.

### *Temporary and Seasonal Labourers*

Like permanent labourers, some temporary labourers develop long-term relationships with employers who they return to year after year. Indeed, some landowners in Jalalgaon have been employing seasonal labour from the same family for generations. Their high wages reflect the high demand for agricultural labour in Biswanath as well as the desire of employers to retain honest, reliable and skilled employees. For example, Mr Farid, a tractor driver from Shunamganj, described to us how, when he was taken ill only a few weeks into a new job, his employer paid for him to visit the doctor and gave him two weeks off. He also allows him to return regularly to Shunamganj to cultivate his own land. Other temporary labourers described to us the high wages to be found in Londoni areas of Sylhet. These can be up to 3,000 taka a month, including cigarettes, food and lodging (compared to rates of up to 1,800 taka a month in Golapganj).

Other labourers are more mobile, moving between their home villages and a variety of destinations in the region in search of employment. Balancing the demands of cultivating their own land in Shunamganj with seasonal fluctuations in demand for labour in Londoni areas, some described to us a degree of bargaining less common amongst permanent labourers for whom ongoing and positive relationships with their employers are more important. As one seasonal labourer, Mr Ajom, told us:

Last year the malik was so pleased with my work that he asked me to return the following year. This year, I was just getting to his house when I met a woman who dragged me into her bari and asked me to work for her. I told her that I was already committed. She said she

badly needed someone, and offered me a rate of 80 taka a day. I told her I'd only do it for 100 taka, and she agreed, so I went with her.

Both agricultural and construction labourers told us that they had never had problems finding work, and in cases such as the one cited above, could negotiate higher wages with employers desperate to find labour at harvest time. In Jalalgaon, the harvest is now completely dependent upon outside labour. During this season in the winter of 2004-5, about 60 agricultural labourers moved into the village. Most were accommodated by their employers and given three meals a day, plus cigarettes. Their wages were often 100 taka a day (in comparison with 60-70 in Golopganj).

Other seasonal or temporary migrants have less attractive terms of employment. Our research indicates that when migrants come from further a field (i.e. outside Greater Sylhet) and do not have direct relationships with their employers, they are more likely to be exploited. The poorest in-migrants cannot afford to pay their fares to Sylhet, and so are reliant upon middle men to organise their transport and employment. Many of these labourers are escaping *monga* (seasonal hunger) in the poorest parts of Bangladesh. Attracted by the availability of employment and tales of the generosity of Sylheti employers, migration may be one of the few options open to them. The following case illustrates differences in the types and terms of employment on offer, as well as the vulnerability of the poorest to exploitation.

Sobor Ali is 33 and comes from Lalmonirhat (in Golapganj, North West Bangladesh). He told us: 'All people in Sylhet are polite and rich. They have a shortage of labour so there are plenty of opportunities to find work there. I met up with Habil, an agent (*sadar*), who arranges for people to go there. I went with 30 other labourers to work in a brickfield. We went in a very crowded bus from Hatibanda to Dhaka. Habil Sadar managed all the costs of the trip. After that we caught another bus to Sylhet, then we were sent to GM brickfield. We were supposed to get 10-15,000 taka for our work, but the *sadar* actually only gave us 6,000. He now owes me about 20,000 taka, but when I ask him for it he just tells me to come back later.

As this case indicates, the lack of social relations between employer and employee means that there is neither social protection for workers such as Sobor Ali, nor any means of redress if they are cheated. Within this context, the advantages of establishing long term relationships

with employers, even if this means that wages and other benefits cannot be directly bargained for, are obvious.

### *Colony Residents*

Finally, let us turn to the inhabitants of Jalalgaon's colonies. As described above, people who live in the colonies of Jalalgaon are perceived by villagers as 'outsiders', most definitely not 'our own poor'. As we have seen, over half come from outside Greater Sylhet and none have kinship links with village 'insiders', despite at least 24 household heads (out of 147 households) having lived in the village for over 20 years. Instead, they have either come to the village through links with other people living in the colonies, or without any immediate links, having heard of the availability of work and housing through the grapevine. The colony residents have not forged kinship links with 'insider' villagers, nor have they tended to develop long standing patron-client relations with them. Thus, whilst they may receive the spontaneous charity of returning Londonis, or benefit from the distribution of meat or other foods during ritual events, they cannot rely in other ways upon the patronage (or social protection, depending upon one's perspective) of Londoni families.

One of the reasons for their lack of social links with the rest of the village, and hence, the absence of social protection that is available for 'insiders', is that most are not employed by insider households. Instead, the majority work as rickshaw pullers, van drivers, peddlers of cheap consumer goods or snacks, and casual day labourers. Of the nine women who work as *boa beti* (servants) only two are employed by village 'insider' households; the remainder work in the households of single men living in the colonies. To this extent, whilst integrated into the local economy through the employment opportunities in the informal sector provided by the 'Londoni boom', residents in the colony are not socially integrated into the village.

The following cases illustrate the complex mixture of factors which lead people to migrate into Jalalgaon's colonies, as well as the opportunities they find when they arrive. As they indicate, processes of 'chain migration' are often important. In both cases, employment opportunities in Jalalgaon have prevented our informants from falling into total destitution. Besides the generalised charity of Londonis, however, any social protection that the majority receive is given by other residents in the colony rather than village 'insiders'.

Amena (from Kishorganj; near Mymensingh):

I came to Biswanath about twelve years ago. When I was in my home village, two of my daughters came here with their in-laws. When my husband died, my daughters brought me here. The main reason we came was for work. At home we originally had quite a lot of land. But then my husband suddenly became paralysed. My sons weren't grown up then, so it was a real struggle. When it was time to marry my daughters we had to sell most of the land. We have a relative who lives in Biswanath and drives a rickshaw there. He suggested that my daughters and their husbands came here to get work, so they did. I was having a terrible time in Kishorganj: whenever my daughters could manage it, they'd send me money, otherwise I'd have starved. In the end the marriages of both of my daughters broke down. The husband of the first abandoned her. The husband of the second kept marrying more wives and in the end, my daughter had to leave. So both daughters returned to Kishorganj. It was very difficult to find work there, and both daughters had very young children. So because of that we were falling into the ocean of starvation. So we came here. Now both my daughters work as cooks, earning about 100 taka a day. If they're involved in preparing food for weddings, they can earn a great deal more.

Asya (from Habiganj, in Greater Sylhet):

Soon after the terrible floods of 1988, both of my parents died. My older siblings were married, but I was very young and went to live with my older sister. When I was older she arranged for me to marry a man from Habiganj. We were doing well. He was a building contractor, and bought us a house to live in Sylhet. But then he got ill with TB. We had to sell the house to treat him. When he eventually died I was pregnant with my second child and had only sixty taka to my name. So I came to Biswanath, where I lived with a woman I knew (in the colonies). I began to beg, and also to work as a servant in different houses, earning about two or three hundred taka a month. I moved around, from house to house, and came to a village in Biswanath called Dhanpur. Eventually I found work with a midwife and learned from her how to carry out deliveries. So I live by doing that. My aim is to find a job in the government hospital.

### **Place, Relatedness and Social Protection: Concluding Remarks**

What we hope to have shown from this brief discussion of the various groups of in- and out-migrants in Jalalgaon, is that the help or protection that the poorer households may get from



wealthier Londonis very much depends upon their degree of relatedness. It is not possible to discuss either the 'effects' of Londoni migration on the local poor, or the social protection available to them, without careful consideration of *who* the local poor are, and what relationships they have with Londoni households, for as we have seen, 'the poor' is a highly differentiated category. As also stated in the introduction to this paper, the term 'social protection' has to be understood as exactly that: the protection against 'shocks' and disasters that people gain from their social relationships. These relations of social protection are context specific, as well as apt to change over time. In Sylhet, for those with blood links, the *shahajo* of the rich is part of a morality which decrees that people have particular kinds of obligations to each other. For incomers, becoming 'our own poor' is more processual. If a labourer lives and works in a household for long enough, they may be able to construct quasi kinship relations and obtain a degree of patronage from the wealthy. This seems to be particularly the case when the incomer is from Greater Sylhet rather than somewhere outside the region. For the most vulnerable, their connectedness to locations at the bottom of the hierarchy of places, and absence of social links with Londonis means that whilst they may enjoy the higher wages and employment opportunities available in the area, the assistance they gain from the rich is confined to ritual distributions at funerals or Eid, alms and, possibly, emergency hand-outs in times of regional crisis such as catastrophic flooding.

For everyone, what matters most in securing a prosperous and safe livelihood is access to place (or rather, to the social relations and networks obtaining there). This in turn is mediated by one's relationships to others. Just as the sons of village insiders wait for the chance to migrate to Britain, hoping that their absent Londoni kin will help them by arranging a marriage to a British cousin, or financing a visit, so do others use the loans of the wealthy to migrate to the Gulf. For migrants from poor regions such as Shunamganj, building up relationships with particular employers means that they have continued access to the wages and work available in Biswanath. The profits for those without these links, who have to move into the area via an agent, are far less.

What will happen in the future? Evidence from elsewhere in South Asia indicates that traditional patron-client relations are breaking down in the face of migration, industrialisation and so on (Kabeer 2002). Our case appears to show the reverse. Absent Londonis are dependent upon labourers and poorer relatives to look after their property, thus maintaining their stake in the homeland. They therefore willingly encourage clientism, sending financial assistance as well as

promises to 'help' with migration. For those that have become wealthy in Britain, their duty to 'their own poor' appears to be as strong as ever; on return to Sylhet, they are expected to give generously to their relatives, as well as provide lavish ritual distributions at Eid, funerals or other events. Arguably, villages such as Jalalgaon have become dependent upon their largess.

How long, however, will such patronage span the distance between Britain and Bangladesh? Whilst Sylheti-British migration can rightly be described as 'transnational', a term which turns our attention to the maintenance of links between places rather than assumed processes of 'integration' of migrant communities within the 'receiving' society, the term has a tendency to mask changes taking place in the relationship between places. Whilst first generation British migrants are generally still orientated towards Sylhet, the interest of their children and their grandchildren in remaining wealthy patrons to a community of dependent relatives is less certain. In a related paper (Gardner and Ahmed forthcoming) we describe in more detail how whilst Londoni migration is associated with a boom in housing, shopping malls and other monuments to modernity, it is *not* associated with an increase in productive investment in the region. Whilst transnational links remain active, our research so far shows how Londoni villages provide a safety net of economic support and employment opportunities for poorer people both from inside and outside the village, albeit in different ways. If the links between Bangladeshis in Britain and Biswanath begin to fade, we fear this net will rapidly develop gaping holes.

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