নৃবিজ্ঞান পত্রিকা, সংখ্যা ১৩, পৃ : ১৮৩-২০৮

Migration and the life course: some cases from Bangladesh

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In this paper, I intend to discuss the relationship between migration and the life course through several cases, all drawn from my on-going research amongst Sylheti transnational migrants and their communities. This relationship is highly complex, involving, at the very least, consideration of a range of cross cutting factors such as gender, ethnicity, culture and class. We also need to distinguish between the physical journeys that migrants take, and the places that they end up in (or return to). Indeed, whilst the 'getting there' part of migration might be the subject of growing interest (for example in his 1997 essay *Routes* James Clifford calls for ethnographies of airports) scholars of migration tend to focus more on the points of departure and arrival, or in the discourse of geographers, the 'sending' and 'receiving' areas. To this extent, my question concerns the relationship between the life course and *place* rather than that of the life course and travel per se. These places are obviously not pre-ordained 'givens', but the product of social construction. As anthropologists we therefore tend to analyse how places are constructed in different ways by different people; by acknowledging the processual way in which places are constructed over time our attention is thus drawn to history and geopolitics.

From this one might ask two linked questions. First, how does the life course affect migration? Second, how does migration affect the life course? In the space of this paper I am not able to give a comprehensive answer to either question so intend instead to offer

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some ethnographic examples which I hope will illuminate some of the issues involved. These are drawn from three interlinked periods of research: my original fieldwork in Talukpur (a migrant village in Sylhet, NE Bangladesh, in which at least half of the village households had members in Britain, and which examined processes of social and cultural transformation associated with global migration); fieldwork in East London in the late 1990s amongst first generation Bangladeshi elders, which focussed on issues such as ageing and illness, as well as life history and the construction of place amongst the elders. The third piece of research has been in another 'Londoni' village in Sylhet, but examined the relationship between global migration to the U.K and the U.S and internal migration, into the village, of far poorer people from elsewhere in Bangladesh.

Before returning to these examples, some general points:

1. Defining the Life Course

We need to think carefully about how 'the life course' is conceptualised. In my use of the term I am referring to the stages that we move through over time during our lives. Whilst in some contexts these may constructed as distinct and bounded (for example, childhood in Britain tends be defined by objectively measurable calendar years i.e.; over the ages of 0-16) in other contexts they are more fluid (for example, when does middle age actually start?). They may be marked physically (the onset of menstruation, or childbirth) socially (getting married, leaving school) or legally (the age at which one is entitled to vote, or hold a driving license). All depend upon cultural context, as well as class, gender and so on.

It's important to understand the life course as primarily a social rather than a physical process, even if its external markers may be bodily. For example, amongst Bangladeshis in Britain as well as in Sylhet, one becomes a '*murubbi*' (elder) not when one reaches a certain age (after all, in rural Bangladesh people often don't know how old they are) but according to family position (becoming a

grandparent) as well as the knowledge and authority that a person is thought to have. The role of *murubbi* is actively performed: men grow beards and wear Kameez and lungis rather than the more western clothes of younger men. One useful way to conceptualise the life course is to think of it as a locally produced map, which shows the destinations that one is expected to reach over one's life, as well as the roads and contours one may have to traverse in order to get there. I shall be returning to this image at the end of the paper.

2. The life course is a major influence in the way that places are thought about and experienced.

The way one experiences places (and indeed the journeys one takes to get to them) are deeply informed by the stage one has reached in one's life. This in turn is fashioned by a host of other interlocking identities, aesthetics and experiences, as well of course as cultural and historical context. We should not, however, fall into the trap of assuming that people at certain stages in the life course necessarily think of and experience places in the same way. We should also distinguish between the various and often contradictory images that the same person might hold about a single place. As I describe in 'Age, Narrative and Migration' (Gardner 2002), whilst Bangladesh may be idealised by some British based Bengalis as 'good' to age in, they also vote with their feet by largely staying put in Britain. British health care and the reluctance of British based children to accompany them back to Bangladesh are major factors. In understanding how the life course is affected by place, we must therefore pay attention both to empirical realities: the existence of the National Health Service in the U.K, for example, as well as to the shifting and complex terrain of ideology.

3. The life course is constructed in different ways in different places

That one experiences places in different ways according to one's age depends in part upon how the stages of the life course are constructed in a particular place, as well as the more quantifiable or empirical realities found there. As I suggested earlier, the life

course acts as a map, or template for how one's life should be, which whilst apparently based in bodily changes, is cross culturally variable. Thus, there may be particular expectations surrounding the behaviour and experiences of children in Britain which are not present in rural Bangladesh (for example, the British fixation on 'stages' of 'development'). Similarly, in Bangladesh, like the rest of South Asia, the elderly are thought of as venerable '*murabbi*', requiring respect and care. It is important to note that whilst there are indeed various well established practices which surround the care of the old, this is in part an ideological construct, rather than always a faithful reflection of reality (as is the image of Britain often expressed by Bangladeshis, as a place where no-one cares for the old, and where they are cast from the bosoms of their families into nursing homes).

4. The construction of the life course is subject to historical change, as well as factors such as class, gender etc.

For example, in rural Sylhet the onset of menstruation was once celebrated by painting a girl's hands with henna, mirroring the wedding rituals that she would soon be undergoing. These days the practice is confined to low status and very poor families, and seen by the more prosperous as both unIslamic and unmodern. In his brilliant monograph 'No Ageing in India', Lawrence Cohen examines how ageing as a medical and social problem is associated with modernity amongst the middle classes in India. In the idealised days of 'traditional India', the dependency of the aged on their children was not something to be feared, but expected and embraced. In the past decade, however, myths of the break-up of the extended family, understood as caused by industrialisation, urbanisation etc, are linked to the spread of Alzheimer's amongst middle class Indians, who are indeed living longer, but are also increasingly becoming constructed as a 'problem' (Cohen 2000).

5. Some possible pitfalls :

Whilst the conceptualisation of the life course draws attention to the way that social roles and identities change with age (however defined), there are some problems:

(i) We need to beware reductive descriptions of 'ideal types'. Movement from one stage to another is not necessarily guaranteed. The life course may be contested, or apt to rupture (for example, in cases of divorce, or when marriages fail to bear children). It may also change historically, as well as between places.

(ii) The life course needs to be analysed within the wider context of household and family relationships. One's ageing is experienced differently not only according to place, but also according to who else is around. EG The so called 'empty nest syndrome' supposedly experienced by menopausal women in Britain, is inextricably linked to the development cycle of their households: with delayed childbirth, children tend to leave home at precisely the same time as their mothers reach 'a certain age'. In rural Bangladesh the menopause is experienced very differently: the majority of women have already had grandchildren by this stage, and rather than facing an empty nest their households tend to be filled with sons, daughters in law and their offspring. I shall return to the relationship between family change (or the household development cycle) and the life course at the end of the paper.

Migration in Sylhet : A Background

As Tasneem Siddiqui points out, migration has been a livelihood strategy of East Bengalis for many centuries (2003). Indeed, the territory of what in the colonial period was East Bengal, in 1947 became East Pakistan and only since the War of Independence in 1971 has been known as Bangladesh has always been characterised by high degrees of fluidity, both within and across its shifting political borders. From pre-colonial times migrants from the west settled the highly fertile but often waterlogged lands of the east, whilst other historical evidence points to movement in the other direction, a continual flow of people, irrespective of national borders (Van Schendel 2005). These constant, cross cutting migrations are both a result of the region's turbulent history, and its turbulent environment, in which floods and cyclones mean that 'belonging' can never be guaranteed. Ranabir Samaddar writes movingly that the country is: 'an insecure environment, inhabited

by insecure families.' Such families dream constantly of escaping insecurity. As Samaddar continues: 'This dream has made Bangladesh a land of fast footed people, people who would not accept the loss of their dream, who would move on to newer and newer lands ...." (1999: 83-87)

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

British Bengali population is Sylheti in origin. Sylhet's special relationship with Britain started in the Nineteenth Century, when men from the district gained a reputation as '*lascars*' or sailors, working on British ships which carried goods from Calcutta to around the world. In the early part of the 20th Century, a growing number of Sylheti *lascars* 'jumped ship' in London, where they stayed, seeking work as peddlers or in London's hotels and restaurants (Chowdhury 1993:33). Although originally men from districts such as Noakhali and Chittagong were also *lascars*, by the Twentieth Century Sylhetis dominated (ibid: 33-35). The reasons are complex. One factor may have been the colonial system of land administration in Sylhet, which made many householders independent owner occupiers of land (*taluk dar*) rather than tenants on large estates owned by landlords *(zamindars)* contributing both to an entrepreneurial spirit as well as the capital reserves required to travel to Calcutta in search of ship work, thus giving them the numerical edge over men from other regions[ii]. Another reason may be the riverine geography of the region, which produced a

population experienced in boats and shipping. Crucially too, particular individuals dominated the recruitment of labour, thus leading to a 'chain' effect whereby men from particular villages and lineages gained employment through the patronage of their relatives and neighbours. In Britain, the chain effect continued. Such was the demand for the 'vouchers' that, as Chowdhury reports, an office of the British High Commission was opened in Sylhet (Chowdhury 1993). This remains open today. Some of the older Sylhetis living today in Britain had fathers and grandfathers who were *lascars*, a few worked on the ships themselves. Thousands of migrants embarked for the U.K (see Adams 1987 and Choudhury 1993). Arriving as young men in the post-war period, most lived and worked in cities such as Birmingham and Oldham, finding employment in heavy industry. Some went directly to London, working in the garment trade as pressers or tailors. Usually living in lodging houses with other Sylhetis this was a period of unremittingly hard work with as much money remitted home as possible. In today's terminology, the men were 'transnationals' par excellance: they worked and lived in Britain, but returned as often as they could to East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971) where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and village community, as well as regional and national political activities. Some men returned more than others. Partly it depended upon their immigration status. The men's particular family circumstances, in particular, whether they had a wife in Bangladesh, were also influential (see Peach 1996). This shift was partly the result of changing immigration laws, which many rightly feared would soon make primary migration to Britain (without it involving marriage to a British citizen) impossible. It also reflected wider changes in the areas where many Bengalis were settled, in which mosques, shops selling *halal* meat and other community facilities were becoming increasingly established. Today, the Bangladeshi population is the youngest and fastest growing in Britain. The 2001 Census enumerated a total population of 283,063 of which 38% were under sixteen. Fifty four percent Bangladeshis lived in London (http://www.statistics.gov.uk) and nearly half of these are situated in Tower Hamlets where they form over quarter of the resident population (in some areas within the borough, this figure is higher). A Labour Force Survey (1997)

estimated that 60% of male Bangladeshi employees and self employed worked in the 'Indian' restaurant trade[iii].

Migration and Transformation : Village Research

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

A similar story can be told in Jalalgaon, the village in Biswanath where the more recent research was carried out in conjunction with colleagues at Jahangirnagar University[iv]. Here the outward effects of Londoni migration are even more extreme than in Talukpur. Situated only a few kilometres from Biswanath Town, with its resplendent shopping malls, fast food outlets and multi-storied community centres, Jalalgaon is a 'Londoni' village *par excellance*. Alongside the humble single storied houses of those who never

went to the U.K, the village is filled with the mansions of successful migrants. These may be up to three storeys high and are invariably surrounded by high brick walls. The architectural styles are reminiscent of the housing developments one might find in Dubai or Saudi Arabia, or in Baridhara, a rich (some may say *nouveux riche)* district of Dhaka. Many have satellite dishes and some have smoked glass windows, an embellishment that until recent years was unseen outside of the U.S or Saudi Arabian consulates in Dhaka. Others refer directly to the migration experience of the owners; just as one might see stone lions guarding the gates of British homes, here stone aeroplanes adorn walls and roofs. In another house in Jalalgaon Manchester United's strip is painted on the outside wall.

None of this would be so remarkable were it not for the stark contrast with the rest of rural Bangladesh, in which mud and thatch (*katcha*) houses are the norm. As in Mirpur, the Pakistani region documented by Roger Ballard, many of these houses are empty (Ballard 2004). Others are lived in by caretakers, often poorer relatives of the departed families. During the course of our fieldwork, ten new houses were in the process of being built in the village. Others became temporarily occupied by a Londoni family, who after a few months returned to the U.K.

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 ninety seven households that identified themselves as 'insiders', their families having lived in Jalalgaon for over two or three generations. Of these, thirty four were known locally as 'Londonis', meaning that a member had migrated to the U.K. Some were permanently absent in Britain, but others still had members living in Jalalgaon. The remaining sixty three 'insider' households either had no migratory experience, or had sent members to the Middle East. In addition to these ninety seven 'insider' households were a great number of other people who had migrated into the area either permanently, or for a more temporary period, and despite living locally were seen as outsiders.

On the periphery of the village's *baris* (compounds, originating from an original household that over the generations has divided into separate households, and therefore usually consist of patrilineal kin) are twenty five 'colonies': thatch, breeze block and tin buildings, reminiscent of urban slum housing, which at the time of our survey housed one hundred and forty seven households, a total of seven hundred and fifty people.

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 one hundred and sixty nine labourers who originated from outside the village, living in thirty three 'insider' households. During the harvest and planting seasons this number is boosted by other workers who either stay temporarily in the colonies, or are housed by their employers. I shall be returning to these in-migrants later in the paper.

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

The extent to which this boom, based on insecure remittances and property development rather than an increase in agricultural or industrial production, will last over the next generation of British born Bengalis is questionable, (and not an issue I have time to deal with in much detail here). What I would emphasise, however, is the extent to which in Jalalgaon as well as Talukpur families who

originated in the area are dependent to a greater or lesser extent on maintaining transnational links with their British based relatives. This is both in order that they can continue to receive the support of their wealthy British relatives (usually these days in the form of one off donations, often to help set up a business, fund further migration, or marriage, or to help in times of crisis), and also because access to Britain and other foreign countries is now seen as virtually the only way to get on in life. Whilst rural hierarchy was once organised around access to land, today the inflation of land prices means that it is generally only through access to foreign wages that one can buy such land. The new axis around which hierarchy is now ordered is therefore that of access to place: those who are either living in Britain, or who have close kinship links to those in Britain, are at the top of the hierarchy, whilst those without links either to foreign countries, or even to Sylhet – the in-migrants, are at the bottom.

From this background, let's return to the question of how has migration has affected the life course.

Case study 1: Ageing in the UK

For the research that resulted in my 2002 book, 'Age, Narrative and Migration', I spent a year working in a Bengali elder's day centre in East London in the late 1990s, interviewing elderly men, many of whom had had strokes, the few female 'elders' that used the centre (due to the demography of the population, most older Bangladeshi women are still in their 50s and 60s) and the wives of the old men, who were labelled as 'carers'. The book examines the life stories of the first generation of Bangladeshis in Britain, and their experiences of ageing in the U.K.

As I've already mentioned, becoming a '*murubbi*' is a social as well as a physical process in rural Bangladesh. As people grow older and their children become adults and marry, it is expected that both men and women gain authority and status. For women in particular, the presence of daughters-in-law in their homes is the chance to move from the relatively subordinate position of a household '*bo*' (wife) to that of '*shashori*': the mother in law, who

is in charge of domestic organisation, and controls the work and general conduct of her sons' wives. This is what Denize Kandiyoti has dubbed 'the patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti 1988). Women in patriarchal societies accept their subordination as younger women with the understanding that as they grow older, they will benefit from the system, having their own daughters-in-law to boss around. Such roles have a material base, Kandiyoti argues. Until both parents have died, households are nearly always joint, with property being in the name of the household head: one's father, or, in the event of his death, one's mother.

Whilst there are obvious dangers involved in generalising in this way about the workings of patriarchy, Kandiyot's observations are resonant with the Sylheti context. They also draw our attention to the relationship between the life course and the relative degrees and types of agency and power which individual men and women have. In Talukpur, older women, whose sons are adult and who live in wealthy households, can be powerful movers and shakers, especially once widowed. As Toshna Meer's mother told me whilst sucking on her hookah (something unheard of amongst younger women): "I'm like a man now."

One of the main issues that arose from my research in Tower Hamlets was that despite the elders' attachment to their roles as respected, authoritative and supported *murubbi* in Britain the material conditions which underwrite such roles have been profoundly undermined. One reason that the first generation gave for this is that most sons are no longer dependent upon their fathers for access to property. Rather, all of the elders who we talked to were dependent upon the Welfare State for both housing and income, as were many of their children. As one man astutely put it:

sons, the government is. So they owe me nothing and I can no longer expect anything from them

Bangladesh, a time during which the generations often come into conflict. A popular theme in many of the men's interviews with us was their inability to get their children to return with them to the desh (homeland) The following comments are typical:

(My children) don't want to go back. They say 'we're not going to the desh (homeland)'. You ask them and they refuse. I asked my daughter why she didn't want to go and she said 'If I go there I can't do anything. there are mosquitoes everywhere, flies, I can't even get a decent drink of water ...

Households are split between Sylhet and Britain, meaning that some of the people who would normally be caring for their elderly relatives remain in Bangladesh are no longer present. It is also affected by conditions in Britain, where working patterns mean that adult sons and their wives often live in different parts of the country. Crucially too, in a community which is highly dependent upon the state for housing, the shortage of council housing for large extended families in Tower Hamlets and local council policy which explicitly prevents extended families from being rehoused together[v], means that Bengali households are physically broken up. As children get married, the shortage of space in council flats becomes particularly pressing. Out of the twenty four households involved in our research, sixteen were nuclear (ie comprising only one generation with unmarried children) and nearly half had at least one member absent, who would conventionally have been living with them in Sylhet. In many cases maintaining the extended family means facing impossible climbs up flights of stairs, damp conditions and cramped conditions, whereas the sheltered accommodation for the elderly offered by the council only ever houses one married couple. Rehousing may also entail being offered a flat outside the Bengali area surrounding Brick Lane and Spitalfields which all of the elders favour over areas such as the Isle of Dogs, dreaded for their racism.

Whilst this breakdown of the classic patriarchal extended family may mean that younger women escape from their mothers-in-law, within Kandiyoti's model of the 'patriarchal bargain', it also means they can no longer look forward to an old age being cared for by subservient junior women. As she comments : 'For the generation of women caught in-between, this transformation may represent genuine tragedy, since they have paid the heavy price of an earlier

patriarchal bargain but are not able to cash in on its promised benefits.' (1988:282)

In sum, material factors, plus the growing participation of their children in alternative, composite cultural forms and of course their interaction with and dependency upon elements of the British state (health care, housing, DSS etc) mean that ageing is experienced very differently in Britain than in Bangladesh. Ideology plays a central role, too. The idealised old age that the elders spoke of, in which, in their villages, they would be cared for by their devoted children, needs to be understood partly as a construct, arising from the realities of life in the U.K. The realities faced by older people in Sylhet are often very different from the fantasy held by their British cousins. In Talukpur for example, I used to visit an old lady whose four sons were all in Britain with their wives and children. Cared for by a servant, she died a lonely death at the end of the 1990s.

Whilst the example of Bengali elders in Britain illustrates how, in this particular case migration might affect the life course, it does not take us far in the trickier question of how the life course might affect migration. Politically, I think this is a particularly important question to pose, since it draws attention to the wider cultural and social contexts within which decisions to migrate take place. By considering the life course as an important determinant we offset the usual stereotypes of migrants as either motivated solely by economic gain, or as 'victims' to the global order. We also move away from theoretically ossified models of 'push' and 'pull', into an understanding of migration as being an embodied process, which takes place within a nexus of social relations, all of which are situated within particular political economies. In the rest of the paper I will therefore concentrate on several cases which illustrate a variety of ways in which the life course affects migration.

Case two: Migration and Marriage in Sylhet

In Bangladesh, marriage is a major marker of the life course signifying a profound change in roles and relationships. Arguably, this is particularly the case for women, who move from being

daughters to being wives and daughter-in-laws. Marriage also marks the advent of adult womanhood. Crucially too, for the majority of women in rural Sylhet marriage involves movement, for the norm is of patrilocality: women move to their husband's household. In the past, this often involved short distances, either to baris within the same village, or to nearby villages a couple of miles across the fields. Wedding ceremonies ritualise the disruption of a daughter's relationship to her natal home. The following song, for example, is often sung by women the night before a wedding:

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

Since the early 1980s however, marriage for some women in Sylhet has meant a more radical departure, for if married to a *Londoni*, it has meant migration to Britain. As mentioned earlier, whilst originally the wives and children of British migrants remained in Bangladesh, from the early 1980s onwards, processes of family reunification had started to take place. This meant that by the time of my doctoral fieldwork in 1986-87, many wives and children had 'cases' pending with the British High Commission. Today all of these people are settled in Britain. For young women whose marriages were being arranged with Londonis, their marriage meant not only movement to their husbands' households (which for many of the older generation had been in the same village, or only a few miles across the fields) but, once they had been cleared by the immigration authorities, a journey of thousands of miles to Britain. In 1987, for example, I attended the wedding of Santi. Enacting the role of physically passive, and grief stricken bride, Santi was carried onto a boat by her husband's family, where she was taken to his bari in another village. The next time I

saw her was in Bethnal Green in London. She has since returned to Bangladesh to see her natal family only a few times.

It would be mistaken to think of such marriages as either 'forced', or as simply taking place as a migration strategy. From the perspective of Santi's family in Talukpur, marriage to a successful Londoni family meant that her material comfort was pretty much guaranteed. For her husband's family, the marriage forged a new link with the *desh.* As Katherine Charlesly's work on Pakistani transnational marriages indicates, brides from the *desh* are often preferred over British born and bred women, for their cultural capital, their relative willingness to assume the role of dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, and the reinforcement of links with the homeland (Charsley 2005).

In recent decades the profile of transnational marriages has started to change. Today it is not only wives who are joining husbands in the UK, but husbands who join British based women. Sources at the British High Commission in Dhaka estimate that about half of the British partners bringing Bangladeshi spouses to Britain are now women. Foreign Office figures show that in 2005, 1530 settlement visas were granted to Bangladeshi grooms (with 330 refused), in contrast to 2133 issued to brides (with 590 refused). These figures have remained relatively stable since 2001 [vii]. A 2004 Report from the Home Office (*Control of Immigration Statistics)* cites a rise of 14% of husbands admitted from the Indian sub-continent since 2003, compared to a rise of 12% of wives.

That a significant proportion of these marriages may involve relationships between cousins (for the Pakistani case, see Shaw 2001). In these cases marriages between British women and their Bangladeshi cousins consolidate links between families who, with some households having been reunited in Britain, are now almost wholly apart. In one case that I know of, for example, two sisters who have been living in Newcastle since they were small children have married the sons of their Bangladesh based paternal uncles *(sassatobiye)*, who they once lived with in the same *bari* (but in separate households). These paternal cousins now live in the same

road in Newcastle with their British-Bengali wives. My impression is that the experience has been positive for both sides. The British households maintain their links with the *desh* (homeland), marrying their daughters to cousins whose characters are already well known to them and who, tied closely into their kinship network, are unlikely to abscond once they have gained British citizenship (as sometimes happens: see Charsley 2003). Meanwhile the Bangladesh based households forge their own, direct links with Britain through the migration of their sons. Overall, the marriages benefit both households, solidifying kinship links between places while allowing for another member of the *gusti* (patrilineage) to migrate.

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

For this group of young men, their dreams of movement to the U.K are associated with particular styles and modes of being, all of which express an orientation towards and connection with the Londoni community in Britain. British street fashion is followed, for example, and hair cut 'David Beckham' style. Trips to local

towns may involve visiting 'Western style' fast food outlets (such as 'Rahman's Fried Chicken'), or the hiring of an immigration lawyer. Shebul is a good example of a would-be Londoni. Aged thirty, he lives with his two brothers and his mother and is keen to follow in the footsteps of his oldest brother, who with the help of their British based sister-in-law married a Londoni bride and is now settled in the U.K. Shebul is also pursuing marriage with a Londoni woman. As he told us : "If I am able to go to London my luck will change. I will be helped a lot by my in-laws who will be able to find me a job .... After that my next step will be to try and arrange a marriage with my younger two brothers as soon as I arrive in London. I really don't think there's any point in them staying here. They have to get to the U.K. They'll achieve nothing by staying here. Here there is nothing: no income, no security, no certainty."

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

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

In another case, an English medium school was opened by a group of six young entrepreneurs in the village. Five of these have now married British women and moved to the U.K. As Katherine Charlsey has described in her work amongst Pakistani transnational families, grooms from South Asia often find their gendered roles reversed, with their British born and bred wives yielding a great deal more power than they would in Bangladesh, and their roles as fathers, husbands and providers radically altered.

Meanwhile for my friends who have two sons in Britain, the rewards have not been what they expected, for rather than being able to remit directly to their Bangladesh households, both sons now have to support their wives and young children in the U.K whilst facing a dire employment market in the North East. All the same, the family are currently working hard to arrange a marriage between their youngest son and a British woman.

Case three: Failure and Disruption : ases of internal migrants

What I've discussed so far illustrates what we might think of as a 'positive' relationship between the life course and migration: life course events such as marriage lead to movement which, give or take some ambivalence, is generally seen by the brides and groom concerned as desirable. A person's life course, and its symbiosis with wider household relationships may however have a more negative relationship with movement. In these cases migration may not be desired, or may mark the end of a relationship. Combined with this, peoples' lives don't always run smoothly. The life course may be experienced as a series of dead ends and disruptions which in themselves cause movement between places.

The first example is death, the end of life's journey. For successful first generation Londonis, death often involves a final trip back to the desh. As I recount in 'Age, Narrative and Migration', a great many British based Sylhetis return to Bangladesh either to die, or to be buried. Although sending bodies overseas involves the *Haram* (ritually forbidden) process of embalming, the Muslim undertakers Hajji Tasleem estimate that about 60-70% of Bengali corpses are sent to Bangladesh by their British based kin. There, they are usually buried in family owned land close to patrilineal homesteads or in some instances in graves close to the shrines of famous Sylheti *pir* (saints) which can be acquired at some cost. Once returned to Sylhet International Airport[viii], the bodies of deceased migrants are transported as quickly as possible to their villages. During my visits to Talkpur, I have observed the return of dead Londonis on several occasions[ix]. In the most memorable, the corpse was transported in a traditional covered boat down the river, garlanded with flowers and accompanied by male relatives and a

cassette recorder loudly broadcasting Muslim prayers. For first generation British Bengalis, many of whom have spent a life time moving between places, endlessly evaluating their past, their present and their futures in terms of a shifting and fantasised 'other' land, these journeys back to Bangladesh mark the last physical movement of their bodies. Buried in the soil of their desh, they finally come to rest.

For Bangladshis who have access neither to the U.K or U.S, and do not have sufficient property to cushion them from periodic shocks and crises, the death of an economically productive member can lead to the need to migrate as a survival strategy. Here, we move from the context of relatively secure and wealthy *Londonis*, to those whose livelihoods are highly precarious: the 31% of Bangladesh's population who are said to live in 'chronic poverty': around 25-30 million people (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 2006). In these cases, the effects of an individual reaching the end of their life course depends upon the stage their household is at in its own development cycle. As I mentioned in the introduction to this paper, to understand the effects of the life course upon migration one has to understand how lives are lived within wider contexts of household relationships. For households without substantial assets, survival depends upon a constant balancing of household consumption needs and productivity. If consumption needs suddenly outstrip the amount that members produce (for example, if the costs of a daughter's wedding has to be covered, or if medical costs arise) the household may no longer be sustainable. The death of a member therefore only leads to household breakdown if the balance between production and consumption is tipped over. If an ageing couple have two or three economically productive sons in a joint household, the death of an elderly father need not lead to economic catastrophe, for example. For others, however, the death of a member, and the lack of a sufficient economic or social safety net in their home village can lead to the failure of the household's livelihood and the need to migrate. As I described earlier, Londoni villages in areas such as Biswanath attract many internal migrants, who cite 'poverty' or 'hunger' as the main motivation for their movement. Whilst

environmental factors (flooding, for example) and regional seasonal shortfalls in food production are often central, so too is the delicate balance between life course events and the household development cycle. This may involve death or illness, as well as the expense of daughters' weddings. Amena's story is a good example of this. Migrating into Jalalgoan from the district of Kishorgonj, she lives with her daughters in one of the local 'colonies' – bustee style dwellings.

I came to Biswanath 12/14 years ago. After my husband's death my daughters brought me here, where they were already living with their husbands. There are many reasons why my daughters came to Biswanath but mainly it was to make a living. I have three daughters and two sons. In our village, we had a considerable amount of land which my husband cultivated, as well as pulling a rickshaw. We were getting on well. But suddenly, my husband became paralyzed, so it was difficult for us to survive. My sons were still children, so we had to sell a lot of our land. We had to sell even more to pay for the marriages of my three daughters.

One of my brother-in-laws lived in Biswanath. Seeing our condition, he told my two daughters that they could come to Biswanath and find work so they can feed their children. Later, two of my sons also came to Biswanath with their wives. Meanwhile I remained in Kishorgonj with my sick husband, where my life was unbearably hard. Sometimes, my daughters sent me money and I survived in that way. After 8/10 years of my daughters coming to Biswanath, their father died. After his death my daughters took me to Biswanath. Since then, I have been living here.

The life histories of other in-migrants in Jalalgaon indicate not only how life course events can lead to the failure of livelihoods and hence migration, but also how smooth progression over one's life course is far from guaranteed. For example, whilst it may be the *norm* that once a woman is married, her husband and his family have certain obligations towards her, in reality things don't always go as planned. For the very poorest women, abandonment by husbands, and subsequent remarriages, was a constant theme in their stories. I would thus like to end this paper with a final case, which illustrates the relationship between disrupted life courses and migration:

Shahena *comes from Jamalpur, a separate district far from Sylhet. Her husband's home district is in Kishoregonj, close to Dhaka. He's an electronic mechanic, who also sometimes drives a rickshaw. According to her: "My current husband is my third. The story of why I came here is full of sorrow. During independence war in 1971, I was about six. The Pakistani soldiers attacked our village and killed my father. My mother was heartbroken and died the same year. I was the youngest of three sisters and one brother. After our parents' death we were helpless, and my older sister had to look after us. Our house was on the river bank, where we had a little land. My sister couldn't look after us alone, so she was helped by one of my maternal uncles. After a year, he married my oldest sister off, followed by my other sister and brother. I was only a child, but my uncle made me get married to a man who was from Maymensing.*

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

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

CONCLUSION

I opened this paper with some general questions concerning the relationship between movement, place and the embodied journeys through time that anthropologists term 'the life course'. How, I asked, does migration affect the life course? Moreover, how does the navigation of these embodied journeys through time affect peoples' decisions to migrate? As I've suggested, this latter question is particularly important, for it departs from conventional wisdom which portrays migrants either as victims or as motivated

solely by economic motives, to understandings which incorporate the wider patterns and pathways of people's lives. People don't migrate simply because they are 'pushed' or 'pulled' by the ruthless tides of the economy. Instead, alongside these wider economic and political factors we need to consider how decisions to move are part and parcel of the personhood and the construction of identities or part of the household development cycle. It is true that the wages that a waiter might earn in an Indian restaurant in NE Britain might be considerably more than he could earn in most non-professional jobs in Sylhet, but to understand why young men are so keen to move to Britain, one must also appreciate how movement abroad is linked to the construction of an active, adult male hood, as well as how it has become tied to marriage and the search for a bride.

Having reached the final pages of my discussion, I'm aware that by claiming so much for the life course, I'm in danger of reducing it to something so wide as to become hopelessly baggy: my opening questions mulching into a composted discussion of the relationship between migration and life. To recap: Throughout the paper I have argued useful way of thinking about the life course is as a map or a template for one's life. This map charts the way that one's life journey should go. The maps we have are culturally and historically specific and of course depend upon who we are. In different places, peoples' life journeys are expected to follow different routes and – arguably – end up in different places. In some contexts the markers are physical, in others they are social; often, they are a mixture of both. In all contexts, however, these journeys take place over the time span of human life. They also rarely take place in isolation. I probably shouldn't push my metaphor too far, but perhaps one could think of travelling with a group of like minded people, upon whom one depends and to whom one has particular obligations: one's family or household.

So, apart from sharing some convenient imagery, what have these maps for living got to do with migration? Maps are of course drawn up with reference to particular places. One part of my answer might therefore be that as a migrant one is in danger of

discovering that having moved to a different place, the map no longer fits the landscape one is in. Again, I have to be careful not to push my metaphor too far, or to imply that we live in bounded cultural regions in which only one sort of map is available, but the elderly Bengali women who I interviewed in London in 1996 and 1997 were to a certain extent lost without a map. They had started out their lives with particular expectations of how their lives would unfold, but in the British context old age was radically different from their expectations, in which they would be surrounded by the care of their family.

In the case of Londoni villages in Sylhet, the map involves an expectation of migration to Britain as part of a successful life journey, especially for young men. Here, marriage for women has traditionally involved migration to their husband's homes. Today, young men also hope that as they reach a marriageable age, their marriages will involve movement, not to a nearby village but to Britain. For those who do not make it, the map has few if any other desirable destinations. What we see here is how globalisation and the history of migration to Britain from Londoni villages in Sylhet have altered the maps that people hold over the course of a generation. At the prospect of NOT getting a tourist visa to Britain, where he hopes he will find himself a bride, my young friend Talleh is unable to think of what else to do with his life.

Finally, when the expectations one has aren't met, and the road one's can't be found on the map, the disruption may lead to migration. Divorce, illness, or the sudden death of a relative who is supposed to be contributing to household productivity were all central causes of migration from poorer areas of Bangladesh to Biswanath amongst our informants in Jalalgaon.

This leads me to my final point. The anthropological conceptualisation of the life course is not about how individual lives unfold per se, but how they are EXPECTED to unfold, usually as a series of stages linked to physical age. In analysing it, we are therefore delving into the territory of ideology, dreams and expectations rather than established bodily facts. The only thing we

can be sure of is that we've been born, and some time after our birth, we will die. The rest is up to culture, class, gender and, of course, the vastly complex and contradictory forces of global history.

Notes

i The Bangladesh government has banned women from certain categories of labour migration. They therefore officially only make up 1% of this figure (Sidiqui, 2003)

ii Until 1947 Sylhet was part of Asaam, rather than Bengal and had a different system of land administration.

iii www.researchlive.com/index.aspx?pageid=72&webexclusiveid=8 - 25k - .

iv The research was managed in Bangladesh by Professor Zahir Ahmed; fieldworkers were Abdul Mannan and Rawnak Khan

v Personal communication from Tower Hamlets Council, 1996

vi Cited in Gardner, 1998 : 217

vii Unfortunately the FO were not able to provide data for previous years.

vii The airport in Sylhet Town started to receive international flights, from Britain and the Middle East, in 1999.

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

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