



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MIGRATION AND THE CHANGING LIVES OF THE WOMEN IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This article deals about migration and its effects in two villages of south-western Bangladesh, named Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. In this article I intend to explore the economic and social consequences of migration at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur and investigate whether or not migration really means development and wellbeing for the people of the villages. My focus is to know whether the impact of migration is uniform for family members left behind by the migrants or varies according to the members' position in relation to the migrants. My quest is hence to find the answers of certain queries: a) what types of people generally migrate at the villages? b) why do they migrate c) do they return and c) whose development does migration finally mean? In doing so, I shall draw here portraits of some migrant families from both the villages, based on my empirical findings during the fieldwork from 2010-2013 in Bangladesh. Additionally, I shall highlight the recent trend of female migration at the villages and its effect on women themselves and their families (particularly husbands and children).

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INTRODUCTION

Considering migration as an economic phenomenon (Safa, 1975), for most developing countries like Bangladesh transfer of population in quest of employment opportunities at national and international level tends to be a common livelihood strategy (Siddiqui, 2003). In terms of remittance earning, Bangladesh retains seventh position (the daily tazakhobor online, 2013) in comparison to its neighbouring countries which leads migration to be the second foreign currency earning sector of the country (Rahimand Alam, 2013). As the recent economic data (monthly wage earners' remittance) of Bangladesh Bank shows, in May 2013 the amount of remittance sent in Bangladesh by expatriate migrants is about 1079.39 million US dollar. International financial institutions like the World Bank, European Union States and many nongovernmental organizations hence see migrants as crucial agents of international development (Glick Schiller and Faist, 2010). Afsar (1998) notes a significant relationship between migration and the broader context of development, particularly rural development while reviewing policy planning issues of Bangladesh. According to her, migration brings economic wellbeing for migrants as well as their families left behind. Iredale *et al.*, (2003) find such benefits from three points of

view: at micro level in terms of increasing income and improvement of social status for individuals and their families, at meso level through channeling investment in agriculture and business activities and thereby stimulating local economy and at macro level in terms of reducing national pressures of unemployment and foreign debt, contributing to enhancement of human and social capital and introducing 'innovative attitudes towards economic development through exposure to more industrialized societies' (2003:5). Given the above understanding, in this article I intend to explore the economic and social consequences of migration at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur and investigate whether or not migration really means development and wellbeing for the people of the villages. My focus is to know whether the impact of migration is uniform for family members left behind by the migrants or varies according to the members' position in relation to the migrants. My quest is hence to find the answers of certain queries: a) what types of people generally migrate at the villages? b) why do they migrate c) do they return and c) whose development does migration finally mean? In doing so, I shall draw here portraits of some migrant families from both the villages based on my empirical findings during the fieldwork. Additionally, I shall highlight the recent trend of female migration at the villages and its effect on women themselves and their families (particularly husbands and children).

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### **Migration and post development: Rethinking the peasants at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur**

Development begins with the idea that 'humans are in some way in control of their destiny and can improve their condition' (Skeldon, 1997:1). From such a modernist point of view migration is seen as a vital driving force for initiating development in a region. However, modernist interpretations of development often tend to conjure up the images of migrants from agricultural societies of developing nations, who are usually peasants in rural areas, as 'traditional', standing in opposition to 'modern' (Kearney, 1996: 116). Redfield (1956) for instance identified peasants to be located in bounded 'little communities' and Wolf (1957) portrayed peasant societies as 'closed' communities. These images of peasant societies hardly provide the changing peasant identities in the global context of transnational migration where peasants as migrants are relocated to unbounded localities taking up new roles of migrant workers.

In the era of post development while peasants are transcending their agrarian boundary by entering informal economies around the world, Kearney (1996) notes that the notion of peasantry should be revised and they should be situated 'within transnational and global contexts that effectively dissolve old intellectual oppositions such as rural-urban, modern-traditional, and peasant-nonpeasant' (1996: 3-4). In recent decades migration has enabled peasants to possess multiple identities that not necessarily relate their relationship with land and agricultural works. Kearney hence shows that 'in reality, the great majority of the world's so called peasants reproduce themselves within complex economic and social relationships' (1996:2). At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur peasant families are increasingly becoming migrant families due to male (and sometimes female) migration to cities or to the Gulf States. The process of migration is therefore found to be transforming peasant identities of landless or small farmers into that of 'peasant migrant workers' and 'land owning proletarians' (Kearney, 1996:2).

Many migrants are sending remittances to their families to venture small businesses like keeping local shops or money lending. Some are found spending in buying livestock and agricultural machineries and emerging as new capitalist class at the villages. Increasingly returning peasant migrants are getting reluctant to get back to agricultural works and are showing their interest in non farming identity like businessmen at local markets. There are instances of some migrants becoming drivers of battery operated rickshaws and mini trucks upon their return to their homes. More commonly, there is a trend among peasant migrants to buy acres of land with the remitted money as a mark of prestige and as a testimony of their traditional relationship with land. This allows them to be absentee landlords and appear as important part of rural land market dealings of buying and selling land. I have found few instances of some peasant migrant families becoming influential politically as they fuel local elections with monetary contributions. In case of rural-urban migration when poor peasants are pushed to migrate to cities or neighbouring villages in search of employment or other factors like landlessness, repaying debts from money lenders or microcredit organizations, they are often taking up non peasant identities of manual (labour) workers, rickshaw pullers, street vendors or even sometimes beggars.

Female migrants who are generally housewives, sisters or daughters of peasant households become domestic or industrial workers (Blanchet, 2002) after migrating to cities or to the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia. From better-off peasant families where both male and female migrations are occurring due to educational and job purposes, it is quite common that members of peasant households are shifting their identities from peasants to students, office workers, bankers and many other professional categories. Seen from the Wolfian perspective which represents peasants as 'populations that are existentially involved in and making autonomous decisions about cultivation' (Kearney, 1996:2), the context of 'being peasant' at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur is continuously changing. As migrants' remittances enhance agro industrialization at the villages where farming requires increasing dependence on chemical fertilizers, insecticides and agricultural machineries like power tillers, shallow and deep tube wells and threshers, internal differentiation of peasants into categories like small, large peasants and landless or proletarians is also apparent as a consequence of migration. This creates a new avenue for re-representing the peasants of the villages into different classes while the introduction of capitalist agricultural system is replacing the indigenous form of farming practices at rural areas.

### **Patterns of migration at the villages**

Like many parts of Bangladesh, there exists a 'migration culture' (RozarioandGow, 2003: 54) at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. Overshadowing its negative impacts, most people, rich or poor, consider migration as a source of economic wellbeing and an alternative livelihood strategy when employment becomes scarce and assets get depleted. Generally, they (people at the villages) depend on two types of migration: rural-urban migration (particularly to bigger cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and others) and international migration to the Gulf States including Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Qatar and Oman. In both cases migration tends to be gender selective (Pryer, 1992). While migration to cities or neighbouring villages is common for both male and female, international migration is more likely to be a male phenomenon. Only few women from poor peasant households are found at Char Khankhanapur to be migrating to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers in recent years (since 2008). Based on the definitions of different forms of population mobility in migration literatures (Chantand Radcliffe, 1992; Parnwell, 1993 ; Afsar, 2002), I have found evidence of certain types of migration taking place at the villages. Locally, the most common type is seasonal migration which is considered as an essential coping strategy during livelihood crisis. Oscillating migration and commuting are also frequent. My understanding of oscillation here depends on Chantand Radcliffe's definition of it as 'movement involving absence from home for as little as one day to up to three months' (1992:11). Commuting is a daily event for local people to visit short distances for work or study and is usually temporary in nature.

Permanent migration which refers to the movement when 'the mover has no intention of returning to the place of origin' (Parnwell, 1993:13) is not a recurrent trend at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur except a few cases of better off families settling at Dhaka. Often such migration takes place as family migration where families either move completely or gradually follow one migrating member of the family.

Individual migrations that involve single person's movement to some big cities or abroad are often non permanent as they tend to return to their place of origin after serving the purpose of migration. Migration to the Gulf usually takes the form of circular, non permanent movement. In most cases Gulf migrants return to the villages to their families after accumulating adequate money to resettle in their home location (in forms of initiating new business or invest in land and modern agriculture) (Chantand Radcliffe, 1992). However, I found few instances of individuals and families at Char Khankhanapur who have permanently migrated to Canada and the United States visiting the village once or twice a year during Eid or other festivals. Rozario and Gow (2003) have also noticed that in Bangladesh individuals and families who migrate from upper middle class and elite groups tend to be migrating permanently to developed countries like the United Kingdom, United States and Australia because of their better financial condition and good cultural capital.

International migration of women to the Gulf States is a recent trend at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur though female migration at Dhaka as domestic workers or garment workers (Afsar, 2002) is very common in Bangladesh. Most often these women belong to poor households for whom migration is a crucial livelihood strategy. I found instances of about ten families at Char Khankhanapur and six families at Degree Charchandpur who have women of their households as migrants to the Gulf. The underlying reasons behind making migration decisions among women of such families are mainly increasing demand for female labour in Gulf countries and facilities of women getting foreign visas with comparative ease than their male counterpart. Besides these, many women find it compelling to migrate abroad when their husbands are not being able to earn sufficiently to maintain a better living. Adhikari (2006) has noticed certain factors enhancing female migration in Nepal. They are: 'to solve immediate financial problems in the family like paying debts, sickness of family members or due to some personal problems like difficulty in coping with the husband and his family members' (2006: 95). Most of these are common for women migrants of Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur.

However, for women of affluent families like that of mine, international migration is considered as a channel for achieving better education and getting paid employment with alluring benefits. Locally, women commute to neighbouring towns like Rajbari and Faridpur in search of job or attending college. During lean seasons many poor women take up labour work at rural earthwork projects of other villages as daily wage earners. In such cases, they go to their work places in the morning and return by evening. Some even commute as agricultural workers at distant villages for getting better pay than earth projects funded by the local government. I have noticed that in case of extreme poverty, destitute women who are usually old, deserted and widowed migrate to villages within shorter distance of their own villages. Rarely these women find it a viable option to migrate to big cities and towns due to their ill health and difficult financial condition. Pryer (1992) also finds how destitute (either divorced or widowed) women at Khulna are becoming 'independent female economic migrants'. Rural poverty is found to be the main reason for such type of migration. Both in and out-migration occur at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. Generally these are rural-rural and rural-urban. Urban-rural migration is very rare except individuals and families retiring at the villages

in their old age. It is fairly regular for men to migrate leaving their families behind. Women and children do not usually accompany migrant men in their new destinations because of financial costs incurred in the process as well as the traditional mentality of not leaving their *bheeta* (household land). Yet, there are some cases that families follow migrant men when they (men) migrate to towns and cities like Dhaka. In case of female migration from rural to urban areas, men and children may not always follow migrant women. Only if women can secure a better living at their destination places, they can afford family migration. Other than this, female migration retains individual, temporary character requiring frequent visits at home.

### Effects of migration on individuals and families left behind

Migration is not a simple process and the way migration benefits individuals and families is never straight forward. It has varied consequence on the lives of migrants and their families left behind. It is hence important to notice the stratified nature of Bangladeshi society in order to understand the impact of migration on individuals and families. The main point of view is that there exists marked difference among people in the society in terms of income, education, skills and opportunities (Rozario and Gow, 2003). Afsar (1998) observes that whether migration is beneficial for migrants and their families depends on their age, education and gender. At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur migration experiences and their effects are not homogenous. As I have noticed, migration means either wellbeing or illbeing depending on individual or family's relationship with migrants. For instance, while migration can be beneficial for some particular male members of family like father, brothers or sons and female members like mothers, daughters and sisters, it can be a source of disappointment and difficulty for wives, specially who are younger in age. Gulati (1993) has found similar experiences among the rural women of Kerala, India who are left behind by the migrant men to West Asia and to Gulf countries. She shows that often migration seizes younger women's control on economic assets including the money sent as remittance by their husbands whereas at the same time it provides older women (mothers of migrant men) with greater autonomy in economic terms. She further shows a basic correlation between increased demand of dowry and migration in her study. Siddiqui (2003) also identifies migration as a negative event in the lives of Bangladeshi migrant families in terms of emotional and educational crisis for children left behind and breaking down of stable marriages. To understand the diversified impact of migration on families and individuals at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur I have focused on the economic, social and psychological consequences of migration. In the economic sense I have highlighted the changes occurring at the village economy led by the transformation of the agrarian sector. At social terms my point of analysis has been to see how migration affects social relationships and at psychological level I have emphasized on the emotional effects of the process of migration.

### Economic effects

It is often taken for granted by the development practitioners and policy planners that remittance sent by migrants stimulates agro industrialization and brings significant economic improvements for their home countries (Parnwell, 1993).

By channeling labour in non farming sectors it is believed to be reducing scopes of domestic unemployment and helping building human capital (Skeldon, 1997) for developing countries. In Bangladesh, governments see migration as a crucial means of earning revenue and decreasing poverty. Particularly female migration is seen not only as an avenue of alleviating poverty but also as a milestone of women's empowerment by incorporating women in the mainstream economic development. Although individuals, families and state perceive migration as a vital component of rural development in Bangladesh, at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur it is found causing economic underdevelopment from certain standpoints. For example at rural areas it has created labour shortage which has resulted in decreased agricultural productivity in poor peasant households (Parnwell, 1993). In Indian Punjab, as Parnwell (1993) shows, while migration has created employment opportunities for non migrants in rural areas, at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur it has escalated local wage rates alongside providing scopes of employment for some landless peasants. Medium and rich farmers therefore find agricultural production expensive for hiring labourers to work in their fields in absence of family members' relocation at some other places within or outside the country. It is true that remittance has allowed some small and landless peasant families to purchase land and agricultural machineries but for many poor peasant as well as non peasant families migration is the cause of losing land and other economic assets (Gardner, 1995).

Siddiqui (2003:6) identifies ten indicators of economic impact to assess the effect of migration on families left behind. They are: '1) reasonable length of stay abroad or returning home before one year of stay. 2) reasonable flow of remittance or inability to generate remittance 3) repaying loans for migration or inability to repay the loan 4) buying land or inability to buy any land 5) constructing a house or inability to construct a house 6) investing in business or inability to invest in business 7) increase in income as percentage of family income or no increase in income as percentage of family income 8) substantially bearing the subsistence costs of a family for a prolonged period or inability to bear the subsistence costs of a family 9) generating savings or inability to generate enough or any savings 10) improved living standard or general deterioration in living standard'.

On basis of Siddiqui's economic assessment of migration, I have observed that migration has proved to be beneficial for a certain class, particularly the rich and middle class. It has helped the rich and medium peasant households to invest in business and other non farming sectors (Afsar, 2003) and enabled them to appear as powerful patrons. Migration means for them a matter of improved social prestige in terms of increasing economic wellbeing. As Gardner (1995) shows in Talukpur, a Sylheti village, due to peasant migrants' investment in agrarian sector like land purchase, there occurs a change in land ownership pattern leading to transformation of rural class structure. Rich and medium peasants are getting richer and small and poor peasants getting poorer. Seen from Marxist point of view, migration has thus generated scopes of social inequality (Kuhn, 2004) in terms of exploitation of the poor (proletariat) by the rich (bourgeoisie) and has enhanced polarization of classes within the villages. There are many cases that migrants from poorer households get exploited by their expatriate employers while they work in Gulf countries. Blanchet (2002), for example, has highlighted in her research

the vulnerability of poor migrant women of Bangladesh who migrate to Middle Eastern counties and India and get forced to work as part time sex workers along with their regular duties as domestic or industrial workers by their employers. Many of my respondents have also reported poor working environment, harassment and longer working hours with minimum pay as their difficulties encountered in destination places. Sometimes when they migrate to the Gulf as short term contract labourers (Rozario and Gow, 2003) they find it hard to manage enough income to support their families as they have to return to the villages as contracts come to end. Blanchet (2002) shows some instances where poor migrant women from rural areas often get cheated by recruiting agents and *dalal* (informal recruiters) and are sent back home with almost no money for themselves or their families. This reflects on Gardner (1995)'s research which illustrates cases of poor migrant women who are physical harassed as domestic workers in their destination places. My findings at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur support both Gardner and Blanchet's works and show the evidence that most poor migrant women get less economic return in exchange of their labour and loss of symbolic capital (by symbolic capital here I mean the social prestige that rural women held for remaining within *pardah* as mothers, daughters and most importantly, wives).

Reviewing Siddiqui's stance, I shall argue that buying land and construction of new house does not always help to understand migrant households' wellbeing. I have found many Hindu migrants of Char Khankhanapur who are economically well off and have not invested in house construction or land purchase. For example I shall draw on the case of Romen Kundu, a Hindu migrant of Char Khankhanapur. Romen Kundu migrated to Dubai in 2003 and have sent a fair amount of money for his family since then. He has got no land registered on his or his family's name, neither has he built a new house for his family. His explanation behind this is, if he or his family exhibits enough money and power, there are increased chance that he will be in trouble by becoming victim of robbery and harassed by the destitute extremists (*sharbahara*) who demand big amount of money (locally called *chanda*). Moreover for being Hindu, he may be politically harassed and robbed of his assets during political turmoil like national elections (usually when extremist political party like Jamayat-i-islami in coalition with Bangladesh National Party- BNP forms government). I have found similar cases at Degree Charchandpur where migrant households fall prey to robbery and targets of *sharbaharas* because of their better economic condition and assets like land, new brick house, luxury items at home and standard living conditions. This has demotivated some migrants to invest less on land purchase and new house constructions and has rather motivated to save money secretly in different banks at Dhaka. From Siddiqui's point of view I will therefore disagree that improved living standard can be the indicator of economic wellbeing of migrant families in Bangladesh. My research further contradicts Siddiqui's idea that ability or inability to repay migration loans can be an indicator of economic wellbeing of migrants and their families. I have noticed that at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur most poor households either deplete their assets or take loans from money lenders and microcredit organizations to arrange migration costs like paying recruiting agents and buying air tickets. Often migrants think that they will repay the loans from their incomes. However, sometimes situations go beyond their control and it happens that they do not earn as they have expected.

In such case they fail to repay loans on time which consequently results in harassment of their families left behind. For instance, at Degree Charchandpur, as Shukur Ali (returned migrant of Oman) states, ‘

*I was a small farmer and was not earning enough to support my family from the meagre agricultural income. Therefore I decided to migrate to Oman so that I can manage a better life for me myself and my family. I had no money to pay for the expenses to migrate. My wife brought about fifty thousand taka from Grameen bank to help me manage the costs with the hope that she can repay the amount from the money I will send her from Oman. But, it is my misfortune that I got cheated and could not earn enough to send back home. My employment contract was false and I was given much less than I was told. I could not even return to Bangladesh my employer blocked my passport. It was a tragedy for me and my family then. Grameen bank loan collection officers repeatedly pressurized my wife for the loan instalments and not only harassed her as well as other members of my family, but also took everything we had like cows, goats, chicken and even the roof of our house. My family was even threatened by the Grameen bank officers to be sent to jail. At such condition I worked many long shifts day and night and sent all that I earned, keeping nothing for myself. I was living like a slave with having minimum food to survive and only one pair of clothing. I was not living, just surviving. I wish I had never migrated’.*

Such a statement clarifies that migration does not always let people repay loans and achieve economic wellbeing for themselves and their families. In case those migrants have the ability to repay loans it may ultimately result in individuals’ economic disadvantage and ill-being. Sometimes the ability of migrants to repay loans affects living conditions of their families. For example, at Char Khankhanapur, Lokman (belongs to a medium peasant household and migrant to Dubai since 2006) whom I met during his occasional visit during his sister’s marriage ceremony said, ‘

*At Dubai I can manage to earn sufficiently to earn for myself and my family. However, I borrowed the migration costs from money lenders with high interest rate. Now I can repay those loans but cannot send enough money to bear my family’s subsistence costs. My mother had an eye surgery last year for which I could not pay due to sending money to the money lender. We had to sell our land to cover her medical expenses. I wish to send my brother to a private university at Dhaka for higher studies but still I have loans to repay. I am earning and repaying loans, migration is nothing beneficial to my family. This year I have married off my sister and my financial contribution is far less than I expected. I do not see any economic benefit of migration for me and my family despite my good earning in Dubai.’*

This challenges Siddiqui’s finding that ability of repaying loans always means economic wellbeing for migrants and their families. It also suggests that Siddiqui has provided a generalized understanding of economic wellbeing for migrant families without taking into consideration of the differentiation of migrants’ experiences. Based on the above illustrations I also disagree with Kuhn (2004) that migration helps poor people to escape from debt cycle. As my data suggest, migration rather aggravates the dependency on debts from money lenders and microcredit organizations which causes financial hardship and deterioration of living standards for

migrants and their families. Amrith (2011) in his work ‘Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia’ also substantiates the related idea of poor South Asian migrants’ reliance on contracted loans from local money lenders with high interest and mortgaging of family property to meet migration costs. According to him, ‘most Asian labour migrants begin their journeys deeply in debt’ (2011: 165). At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur I found some instances that even if poor households do not sell their lands or other economic assets to manage migration expenses, they are forced to sell almost their every belonging to pay loan instalments if they fail to repay loans from remittance (in case they borrow loans from microcredit organizations). As Aklima, one of the female labour migrants of Degree Charchandpur says,

*‘I decided to migrate to Dhaka in search of employment so that I can earn a better living for my family. But, I had no money to arrange bus fare and my living costs as long as do not secure a job. I was looking for some money from Azgar Mia, our local money lender and found it very expensive due to the high interest charged against the credit. My sister-in-law, Ayesha, suggested me to borrow a loan from local BRAC office. According to her suggestion I loaned about 10,000 BDT to cover the expenses during my stay at Dhaka. I hoped that I will repay the loan from the money I get from my job there. However, despite my repeated search for a viable employment, I could not get one and failed to repay the debt on time. BRAC officers took away every belonging we had, even our clothing. Finally I had to repay the loan by selling our small piece of agricultural land, the only source of my husband’s income and our family subsistence’.*

According to her statement it indicates that instead of being a source of economic wellbeing, migration has turned for many poor households like that of Aklima a cause of ill-being drowning them into debt and poverty. The statement also opposes Kuhn’s idea of considering migration as a ‘source of credit and insurance alongside more traditional arrangements of informal credit and exchange’ (2004: 312). Like Gulati (1993) as she finds in Indian Kerala, I have noticed a strong connection between migration and dowry as a basic form of economic exchange involved in marriage at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. For most rural households (both rich and poor) migrant men are considered as good match for girls. Therefore, it is quite common that brides’ families pay a handsome dowry to migrant grooms and their families even it costs their existing economic assets and family savings. For example I found several instances that brides’ families spend beyond their capability either by selling assets or borrowing loans to pay the dowry for marrying off their sisters and daughters to affluent migrant grooms. Sometimes, brides’ families pay air tickets, recruiting agents’ fees and other related expenses for groom-to-be. In such case while migration proves to be economically beneficial for grooms and their families, it appears to be a burden and a reason of economic pressure on brides and their families. Gardner (1995) has shown similar effects of migration on dowry payments at Talukpur, Sylhet where brides’ families sell their economic assets to satisfy grooms’ families with lavish dowry items. However, she has indicated a transformation of dowry pattern at Talukpur where economic resources flow at both sides (bride – groom as well as groom-bride) which is not evident in my case. At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur whether migration brings economic benefits or sufferings for migrants and their families depend mostly on differential

relationship patterns of individuals within and outside family alongside important factors like class, age and gender. For example, female migration brings economic advantage for husbands and children if women are married whereas it is beneficial to women's natal families if they are unmarried, young migrants. On the other hand, in case of male migration both men's immediate families (comprising of wives and children) as well as extended families (parents, brothers, sisters and others) get financially helped. As I have noticed, migration may affect same person in different ways depending on his/her relation with the migrant (being a sister of a migrant brother and wife of a migrant husband). To illustrate this I will draw on the following case of Rabeya Begum of Char Khankhanapur. Rabeya's husband and brother both are migrant labour workers in Dubai. Her husband sends money to his parents for maintaining daily household expenses instead of sending directly in her name. Rabeya does not have access to that money unless provided by her in-laws. She is not happy for this. Every time she asks for money, she has to explain the reason repeatedly and sometimes despite explaining she is not allowed to have any money.

She says, *'my husband sends money and I do not have right to have it. I want to buy something for me and I am denied to spend so. I would have felt much better if my husband could send money to me directly'*.

The case is however somewhat different when Rabeya talks about her brother Kashem. Kashem sends money regularly (at the middle of month) to his father's bank account. Whenever Rabeya wants she can ask for money from her father and she gets it without any objection from any of her natal family members. Rabeya feels happy as she can access her brother's money whenever she is in need.

In her words, *'Kashem loves us all and spends money for us, including me and my sister. He has paid for my younger sister's dowry and other wedding expenses. I am happy that I have a brother like him'*. Here both statements are regarding control on monetary affairs of a same person with varying effects. It indicates that whether or not Rabeya is economically benefitted as a person depends on her relationship with the migrant member of her family suggesting that migration does not uniformly mean wellbeing for every member of families.

In terms of economic development, I have observed the impact of migration on the village economy of Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur as quite negative. Not only it has transformed the rural economic infrastructure but also has brought about a marked change in livelihood choices of local people. There is an increasing trend of taking up non-farm employment among people and disgust for agricultural works (Gardner, 1995) due to chances of livelihood diversification and alluring migration opportunities to the Gulf. This is gradually letting towards decreased agrarian production and increased food price impacting on the village economy. As Oberai *et al* (1989) finds at Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala provinces of India the relationship among agro industrialization, adoption of high yielding variety seeds and migration, I have noticed the same at my study villages. Migrant households tend to invest remittance as a form of agrarian business in buying modern agricultural inputs (machines, high yielding seeds, chemical fertilizers) and hiring of wage labourers to replace household labour. They spend more on consumption rather than on production (Oberai *et al*,

1989). As a consequence local poor farmers who cultivate their lands for subsistence crops using their indigenous farming knowledge is encountering difficulties to cope with the local agrarian markets in terms of production cost and profit and start feeling tensed to maintain a balance of market price for their products. Most of them hence abandon their indigenous practices and depend more on mechanized farming by hiring power tillers, water pumps and threshers from other rich and medium farmers who practice modern, machine based agriculture. Often these local farmers (usually non migrants) are poor and do not afford such capitalist investment in agriculture. In such case, they borrow loans from money lenders or microcredit organizations and run into never ending debt cycle ultimately deteriorating their economic conditions.

### Social effects

While migration takes place with 'the positive hope of a better life in an unseen world' (Arya and Roy, 2006: 8), at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur it has negated the concept of bringing a constructive change in local lives. Socially it has opened the avenue of inequality on one hand in terms of power and status and has created scopes of conflict within and outside households on the other. For instance, migration categorizes people into rich and poor and 'mark divisions between groups' (Gardner, 1995 : 9). This has a far reaching impact on the patron-client relationship existing at the villages which regulates local factional politics. It is common for villages like Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur with agrarian economy to find peasant migrants become absentee landlords. They usually have share croppers or care takers of their lands in their absence. Often it happens that one or two migrant brothers are economically better off than non migrant brothers in a family. In such case migrant brothers appear as patrons for the non migrant brothers creating a relationship of mutual dependence and trust. Gardner (1995) has noted similar scenario at Talukpur village, Sylhet where remittance as a form of economic capital transforms into social capital building stable social networks. I have noticed that patron client relationship as an aftermath of migration has depleted social capital instead of enhancing it at my study villages. There are several instances where remittance becomes a source of conflict generating sense of jealousy and enmity among family members.

For example as Ansar Bepari from Char Khankhanapur states, *'we were a very happy family with three brothers and two sisters. In 2007 two of my brothers migrated to Qatar as labour migrants leaving their wives and children with me and my wife. As soon as they started to send money from Qatar, quarrelling among wives within the house became a daily phenomenon. My brothers' wives looked down upon me and my wife as their dependants and made my wife do all household chores as if she is their maid. My wife felt sad all the time but did not complain against them. It was my two bhabis (sister-in-laws) who tried to make fun of her and did conspiracy against her to let her feel down. Sometimes they quarrelled among themselves regarding the money their husbands sent for household expenditure. They thought I was misappropriating the money'*.

His statement suggests that migration has caused disharmony among his family members concerning money matters. It has also generated inequality within a same family in terms of power and status where affluent brothers and their individual

families exert control on less affluent brother and his immediate family. As my data further reveals, the idea that migration creates social capital for individuals and families gets contested. I have noticed that at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur migration does not mean improvement of social networks for everyone and in some cases it becomes a means of political rivalry. To illustrate this I shall describe here my own family's case where Akhlak Khandaker, a migrant family at Char Khankhanapur gets involved in land dispute with my father Haji Sardar, a rich land lord. However, rather than depending on my own account I shall take the narrative of Ameer Mollah, relative of Akhlak Khandaker at Char Khankhanapur in this regard.

As he says, *'Akhlak and his family have migrated from Noakhali and have been living here since 2008. Three of his brothers are Gulf migrants and send him money regularly to run his departmental store at local bazaar. He is quite rich and since the last few years he has bought land and shops investing enough money in business. Recently he has purchased Haji Sardar's land from a secondary source finding it cheaper. But, he did not know that the land was disputed already for being a Hindu joint property. Therefore, when he has tried to gain control on that piece of land, he got involved in conflict with Haji Sardar. Haji Sardar, being local to the area, has hired musclemen and utilized his relatives' support who are usually his clients from Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur and decided to refrain Akhlak and his supporters from accessing his (Sardar's) land. Akhlak and his brothers have invested money on that land and they are also reluctant to stay back. This finally has led to serious conflict between these two parties (Sardar vs. Khandaker). Both parties has spent good amount of money in hiring musclemen to encounter each other and got engaged in physical fighting.'* This event indicates that migration has meant for Khandaker family a source of dispute and rivalry while for Haji Sardar it has proved to be a means of enhancing social capital (though it let him and his family undergo temporary political stress). Remittance sent by brothers from the Gulf has allowed Akhlak to invest in business and hire musclemen during fighting. His as well his brothers' migration have brought for him economic wellbeing and suffering at the same time. As a migrant he failed to gain local support but through this fighting he has strengthened Sardar family's position in local factional politics letting him renewing relations with his kins and clients.

Regarding female migration, my research however supports Skeldon's (1997) point of view that 'not all migration has necessarily resulted in an improved status for women'. It hence opposes Adhikari's (2006) findings in Nepal where he shows that migration leads to 'enhancement in the position of women in their families because the earnings of these women helped families to get over their economic crises and sometimes even helped to raise their standard of living' (2006: 104). I have noticed that at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur poor women who migrate to cities or to Gulf countries as domestic or industrial workers are looked down upon by the society due to their stepping out of *pardah*. Local men and women see poor women who work to earn money outside their house as not having any '*shamman*' or social prestige as '*pardah* continues to be a powerful cultural ideal within Bangladesh' (Pryer, 1992: 141). However, people's perception is markedly different in case of women from rich and elite families of the village. For example, people see my migration to the United Kingdom for pursuing a PhD degree and my

work as a lecturer at a public university at Dhaka as quite prestigious. For me migration to the UK is a mark of dignity and improved social status creating for me and my family the 'cultural capital' for 'having been in abroad' (Gardner, 1995: 130). I have found many cases where migration brings misery instead of wellbeing for poor women. For instance when men migrate leaving their wives and children behind women have to take over all household responsibilities and are burdened with dual role of a mother and a father at the same time. Again, if the case is that women need to commute for work, they have to work double shift (to earn money and to manage domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning and looking after children). In case of female migration to cities or to Gulf countries leaving their husbands and children behind, men need to perform household chores and child care which transforms the existing social norms (Gardner, 1995) and changes gender relation patterns.

My research indicates poor women's further plights focusing on migration's effect on their family relationships, particularly with their husbands (Siddiqui, 2003). Many women find themselves cheated when they know about their husbands getting involved with other women (marriage or illicit affairs) in their absence (though men have similar experience when they migrate leaving their wives behind). I have noticed few cases at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur where migrant men tend to withdraw from their family responsibilities being financially capable to start new family. I shall illustrate here the following case of Saleha, a migrant's wife at Char Khankhanapur. Saleha is married for 10 years with Imdad who is currently a migrant to Saudi Arabia. She has a little daughter called Rani and her age is about 5 years. According to Saleha, Imdad left for Saudi Arabia on November, 2010 leaving her and her daughter with his parents at Bashantapur, a village near Char Khankhanapur. For the first year Imdad was sending money regularly for them (she and Rani) and everything went on well financially. Since January, 2012 Imdad stopped sending money for her and asked her to maintain living from subsistence agriculture of his family farm.

Saleha agreed to Imdad's words but her in-laws started conspiracy against her to drive her out from the family by creating tension between her and her husband. They were not providing the financial support required for her as well her daughter's maintenance. Therefore, she asked Imdad to send her money separately. Imdad got furious blaming her for not being able to adjust with his parents and denied to send her any money. This affected her as well as her daughter's living condition. She could no longer afford Rani's school expenses and repay micro credit loan instalments she borrowed to meet Imdad's migration costs. She returned to her parents at Char Khankhanapur and started to work as a maid for neighbouring affluent households. Due to economic hardship, she has now stopped sending Rani to school. Saleha still does not know if she will be able to keep up her marriage with Imdad or not. As the above case indicates, male migration proves to be having negative consequences for poor women like Saleha both economically and socially. It not only pushes them towards uncertainty but also brings misfortune for their children (as I have shown Rani's situation). Often women find it difficult to cope with their deteriorating economic condition for the sudden shortfall of remitted money sent by their husbands. In case that women return to their natal households, it creates additional economic pressure for their parents and other family members.

Rani's case illustrated here also challenges Hadi's (2001) findings that migration enhances educational opportunities for girls of migrant households in Bangladesh and Saleha's case opposes Gardner's (1995) concepts that male migration increases economic power and social security for women. However, Gardner's findings regarding the relationship between male migration and women's economic empowerment is applicable to some rich migrant households where women emerge as powerful patrons for local poor women (being local money lenders for poor women and investing in animal share rearing) depending on their financial flow from abroad. Seen from this perspective I shall hence agree with Gardner that women's social and economic power depend on their access to resources and male support.

Female migration, in some instances also creates social disruption for women from rich and elite background which suggests that migration is a 'complex process' (Parnwell, 1993 : 100) and experiences of migration are quite subjective varying considerably from person to person on basis of class, age and gender. It is hence difficult to generalize its impact on migrant individuals and families. Rozario and Gow (2003) for instance has shown how migration has become a source of unhappiness and social ill-being for Suraya, who migrated to Australia for higher studies with her husband and ended up in divorce. As I focus on my case, migration though has brought social prestige for me and my family, it has strained my relationship with my husband and in laws. Migration to UK for A PhD degree has not only delayed by reproductive life cycle (I have become a mother on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2013 after 8 years of my marriage) but also has deprived my husband from being with his mother during the last days of her life. Both these are events of discontent for them. Moreover my husband left his job as a school teacher in Bangladesh, sold his academic business (running a tuition coaching) and borrowed some loans (to pay for his visa charges and plane fare) to accompany me in UK with the hope of a better life. But, he has not managed to earn as he expected which has made him frustrated. His frustration is having effect on our conjugal relationship as he blames me and my migration to UK for studies for his misfortune. Despite spending almost all of my scholarship money on living and doing my best to satisfy him, I am not happy. Migration has cost me my well being putting my relationship in uncertainty when I return to Bangladesh after finishing my degree. Having depressing impact on reproductive cycle and family life due to migration is evident among most women (rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim) at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. This can be well represented by Mariam's case, one of the migrant's wives at Degree Charchandpur.

In her words, *'my husband has migrated to Qatar just 5 months after my marriage. We could hardly know each other within this short period of time. Now it is about 3 years that he has not visited Bangladesh. I am now at the age of 25 and other girls of my age have already children. If my husband was here I would become a mother too. I feel so incomplete without having any child and I really do not know when I can become a mother. I should have my first child within my early thirties but I am uncertain about my husband's return. If I cannot become a mother and pass my reproductive age upon his return, I know my in-laws will influence him to remarry. This will mean a big misfortune for me'*. Mariam's narrative here suggests that her husband's migration has affected her reproductive life and has put her in doubt about her marital

sustainability. It lets her feel insecure since her credit as a wife (according to rural tradition) depends mostly on becoming a mother. Gulati (1993) has found similar cases in rural Kerala, India where male migration has allowed less space between migrant husbands and their wives for building up emotional relationships and limiting their family sizes due to prolonged absence of men in families. Gulati's (1993) finding that male migration creates tension within family relationships is also evident in my research at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. I have noticed that most often men are not in position to take their families with them while they migrate to cities or abroad (Rozario and Gow, 2003). In such case they need to leave their wives and children to stay with their parents and other members of families. This creates scopes of intra household conflicts and deterioration of family relationships. To illustrate this I shall focus on Somiron's case at Char Khankhanapur who undergoes hard time with her in laws during her husband's absence at home.

Somiron's husband Manik was a poor landless farmer and it was very difficult for him to eke out a living from small scale farming. He tried to find an employment as a daily wage labourer in a neighbouring village but still that was insufficient. He therefore decided to migrate to Dhaka to improve his financial condition leaving Somiron and her children with his parents. However, as Manik left for Dhaka, his parents started to behave strangely with Somiron and took every opportunity to harass her with verbal abuse. The situation often aggravated when Manik's elder sister, Rumi visited the house. Rumi scrutinized Somiron's every activity and made bad remarks. Sometimes she provoked her mother and elder brother to beat Somiron for trifle mistakes with household chores. As Manik was not there, no one was on Somiron's side and she had to suffer silently. Though she tried to complain Manik regarding this, she was told to have patience and try to adjust with the situation. But as Somiron said sometimes she could not remain docile and quarrelled with her sister-in-law and sister-in-law. This created tension in her relationship with Manik as well as her in laws. Somiron believed that if Manik's presence could have helped her avoid such intra household chaos and maintain a balanced relationship with her in laws.

As the above case shows, male migration does not always prove beneficial for women, particularly the wives. Though it may sometimes empower women as mothers of migrant sons, for wives it means social and psychological suffering. There are other cases where I found that when male migrants return home, their relationship with their wives get bitter, sometimes ending up in domestic violence (battering of wives) or divorce. Since men are away from home as migrants, they are more likely to get a false impression of family disputes and finally see wives as main source of household conflict. In some instances I have observed that some migrant men are pushed by their family members to be rude to their wives. If they do not do so they are prone to social ridicules within and outside households being labelled as *'bou er bhera'* (wife's sheep).

### Psychological effects

At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur migration has far reaching psychological effects on women and children left behind. As mothers while women are affected in one way, as wives, daughters and sisters consequences are different. Migration is found to be even having emotional values for individual migrants themselves irrespective of class, age,



gender and religion. Siddiqui (2003) has noted certain negative outcomes of female migration in Bangladesh. She shows that when women migrate children are the worst affected. In absence of their mothers, children suffer academically as well as mentally with developing a sense of insecurity and lack of emotional attachment. She also pinpoints that migrant women also undergo mental trauma feeling the guilt of causing difficulties (disruption of social roles and children lacking emotional care and support) for their families. I have observed similar emotional effects of female and male migration on their families left behind at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. For example, many poor migrant women told me about their own mental stress not to be able to stay with their families. Some mentioned about their children getting sick in their absence and their feeling of vulnerability to cope with the new environment where they migrate. Most of the women I interviewed signaled their inner tensions of losing marital relationship with husbands by simply expressing, '*purush lok meye manush chchhara koi din thake*'? (How long can men stay without women'?

For some women though migration has positive outcomes like helping them leave bad marriage, build new relationships and gain autonomy by negotiating the male domain (Siddiqui, 2003; Gardner, 1995), I have noticed that it does not always provide them with social prestige and mental peace. According to Rahela, one of the female migrants of Degree Charchandpur, migration has enabled her to escape from her rude husband and in laws by giving new scopes of living a good life but it has seized her of satisfaction of being a 'bhalo bou' or good wife as well as a successful person. It has stigmatized her as 'doononon' (whimsical) due to her failure to keep up her marital status adjusting with husband and in laws. In her words, '*meyeder dui biye kora mane dui noukay pa deya*' (for women marrying twice means stepping into two boats at the same time) which indicates her mental agony of not being happy even getting into new relationship leaving the former one. There are some instances where for women migration has imposed threats of sexual exploitation by neighbouring men, male relatives, co-workers and even employers. These put women under psychological stress with a feeling of helplessness. According to their views, as migrant worker if they protest they will be laid off from their jobs and sent back to villages empty handed by employers. Again, as wives of migrants if they complain about such exploitations they will be harassed socially and lose their reputation at the villages. In such circumstances women mostly feel caught in-between with social insecurity and emotionally distress.

For younger migrant wives male migration is often a source of grief and loneliness. Gulati (1993) for example has shown some cases where younger wives suffer from lack of emotional relationship with their husbands who leave them immediately after marriage. At Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur I have noticed older women to be emotionally well off than the younger ones as a result of migration of male members of their families. For instance, while older women like mothers, aunts and grandmothers mention only about missing men in particular events like festivals and critical decision making moments at household level, younger women as sisters refer to their loss of emotional sharing with brothers when they are away. Feelings of loneliness and sexual deprivation tend to be the adverse effects on women as wives, especially the younger ones (with or without children). Feeling of confinement and loss of independence are common among

younger women of some rich and poor households at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur. Most women I interviewed related their emotional distress with lack of independence of their free movement to markets, neighbouring villages or natal homes. In absence of their husbands, women's access to public places is considered by their in laws as loss of social prestige (purdah remaining the predominant concept of honour for women with better economic condition) bringing '*lajja*' (shame or disgrace) for women themselves and their families. Usually mother-in-laws and sometimes father-in-laws or brother-in-laws control movements of migrants' wives forcing them (women) to be vulnerable with a feeling of isolation. From the in-laws' point of view the main concern of dominating women's movement is not only to protect them from evil eyes of male outsiders and safeguard their sexuality but also to keep women under control as docile wives. According to most return migrants of Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur, migration is often the cause of alienation from one's own culture and social traditions for individuals and families (in case of family migration). Bhugra (2004) has noticed that migration results in psychological stress among people due to problems encountered with their adaptation to new culture of destination places and sense of social deprivation leaving their families and customs behind. Munib (2006) has shown in his research on Indian and Bangladeshi migrants of Melbourne, Australia who suffer from emotional difficulties backed by feeling of isolation, alienation, cultural uprootness, experiences of racism and discrimination and social disconnectedness because of their migration to Australia. Many of my respondents expressed similar feelings at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur while they were living away from their home and families as migrants. Some of them indicated their emotional sufferings of loneliness and homesickness despite their economic gain as migrants in Gulf states.

### Factors responsible for migration

Given that migration brings misery for individuals and families in terms of economic, social and psychological ill-being, the question that appears to be vital at this point is 'then why do people migrate?' To find the answer for this I have focused on my ethnographic findings where migrants and their family members explained the reasons behind making migration decisions. As my research indicates migration occurs at Char Khankhanapur and Degree Charchandpur 'in response to a wide range of factors which affect different people in different ways' (Parnwell, 1993: 72). For example while young, educated people from rich and medium peasant households usually migrate to international locations like the United States, UK, Australia and to different cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and Rajshahi for study and employment purposes, less educated and semi skilled people migrate to different places within the country as well as to Gulf countries for finding better economic opportunities.. Mostly the underlying reason of migration is 'feeling of being poor' (Skeldon, 1997: 164) in relation to the existing social and economic scopes available to them. Based on my research findings I have noticed that basically local people are pushed rather than pulled to relocate themselves. According to most respondents such push factors can be categorized as following: 1) Lack of economic chances to maintain a sufficient, local living 2) continued hereditary division of land into uncultivable pieces 3) debt 4) limited scopes of higher education 5) competent landlords' factional politics 6)

desertion by husbands, sons and fathers (in case of female migration) 7) family disputes 8) exploitative patron-client relationships 9) unequal social treatment towards the poor 10) inability of continuing same standard of living upon return home from destination places and 11) social prestige associated with migration (particularly international migration). During narrating their migration experiences many respondents depicted that if they had enough scopes to survive on local resources and did not face discrimination in terms of social status and power based on migration they would not have migrated leaving their families behind. For instance while many returned migrants like Azmal Fakir of Degree Charchandpur focussed on their miserable lives as migrants and expressed their disappointments because of making choice of migration as a livelihood strategy, migrants like Araz Ali of Char Khankhanapur mentioned economic pressure of sending money to family members as one of the key reasons of not returning to the villages for good. Some migrants also accentuated on their fear of falling below their current living patterns as a factor responsible for remaining long time at their new locations. For example, for Palash Chakravarty (immigrant to Canada) of Char Khankhanapur migration appears to be quite beneficial in terms of economic benefit and improvement of social status. According to him, he and his family cannot retain the present standard of living if he returns from Canada and resettle at the village. Therefore as my research suggests, the idea that 'migration is a relatively predictable and homogenous form of action' can easily be contested because of the 'huge complexity and heterogeneity' involved in the migration process (Parnwell, 1997: 72).

### Conclusion

In terms of economic advancement while migrants are seen as 'heroes of development' (Delgado Wise and Marquez Covarrubias, 2010: 161) by international financial institutions as well by governments of developing countries like Bangladesh, this article aims to challenge the concepts that 'migration boosts economic output at little or no cost to locals' and it 'generally brings benefits for migrants' countries of origin, most directly in the form of remittances sent to immediate family members' (Glick Schiller and Faist, 2010: 2). Based on my ethnographic evidences I have shown in this article that at rural areas migration occurring both at national and international level is transforming peasant identity into non peasants and absentee peasants who invest in capitalist agrarian expansion as a profitable business. As I have noticed, migration is basically a complex process and whether migration brings wellbeing for local people depends mostly on their class, age, gender, education and social status. For instance, economically while migration creates scopes of employment for many poor peasant and non peasant households, at the same time it increases risks of their vulnerability in terms of getting exploited by their richer counterpart and getting pushed into never ending debt cycles. I have noted that migration enhances a feeling of disgust towards agriculture as a livelihood practice among local people. By introduction of agro industrialisation, it is also gradually replacing indigenous farming with machine based cultivation imposing dreadful consequences for the environment. For local villagers migration has become a source of social inequality aggravating polarization of classes which has significant effects on local factional politics. Psychologically, while it generates sense of dislocation, loneliness and ill-being for individual migrants and their

families, by depleting social capital and symbolic capital it increases local people's vulnerabilities, particularly that of the poor women. Whether or not women get benefitted from male migration depends mostly on men's support (Gardner, 1995) and as my data reveals migration (either male or female) does not necessarily improve women's economic and social security letting them bargain with existing patriarchal values (Kaur, 2006). Though sometimes it enables women with gaining economic independence, it ultimately appears as a cause of 'silent suffering' for most women robbing them of their dignity and rights (Seeley *et al*, 2006: 187). In this article I have shown that despite having negative consequences of migration on their lives, local people still migrate and not all of them prefer to return to their place of origin. Mostly the reasons are depletion of local resources, thrive for keeping up economic affluence and existing living conditions, increased social prestige associated with international migration and lack of sufficient economic and educational opportunities at local area.

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