

JOSÉ MANUEL FRAGA MAPRIL

## The patron and the madman: migration, success and the (in)visibility of failure among Bangladeshis in Portugal

Based on research about Bangladeshi migration in Portugal, carried out between 2003 and 2008, the main objective of this article is to explore ethnographically the ambiguity of the migratory imagination. This ambiguity is expressed in two figures – the patron (the *patrão* in Portuguese) and the madman (the *pagol manusch* in Bengali). The first is the exemplary migrant, economically successful and morally responsible while the second is an extreme case of failure and a source of a difficult knowledge. Both are constant reminders of the possible (and opposite) fates of all those that are now arriving in Portugal, therefore producing a strong normative ideal about success and failure.

**Key words** migrations/transnationalism, success/failure, (in)visibility, Bangladeshis, Portugal

Let me begin this article with a vignette from my fieldwork among Bangladeshi migrants in Lisbon.<sup>1</sup> As was usual in those days, I met Moina in his workplace in central Lisbon – a small photocopy shop that usually caters for South Asians and other migrants, located in a so-called immigrant neighbourhood. We were just hanging there, talking about this and that, when Abdul, a friend of Moina who was in Azimpur, Dhaka, called him. They had known each other since school and remained friends ever since. Abdul wanted to know how things were in Europe and if he could count on Moina's help to come to Lisbon.

Moina agreed but also warned Abdul that things in Europe were far from what he was expecting. You had to work long hours, doing jobs that one would never accept in Bangladesh, and for small amounts of money too. His own case was revealing: Moina was a graphic designer in Dhaka, who is now making photocopies in downtown Lisbon. The closest he gets to graphic design is when he makes presentation cards for fellow countrymen who have their own businesses. Furthermore, he added, he is frequently afraid of bumping into the 'authorities' because of his illegal status. At the other end of the line, though, Abdul kept insisting that he really wanted to come to Europe, no matter what. He did not care about the difficulties; things could not get worse than they were. At some point, and after insisting with his friend that things were not exactly what he was expecting, Moina changed subject, and soon after the

1 This article is based on PhD research in Anthropology, between 2003 and 2008, funded by the Portuguese Science Foundation, about transnationalism and Islam among Bangladeshis in Lisbon. Fieldwork took twenty months and was carried out in Portugal and in Bangladesh.

phone call ended. Upon hanging up, I asked him why he had stopped talking about the difficulties of living in Portugal, to which he replied, 'If I insisted, he would think I was being selfish, trying to keep him away from all the wealth. So let him come and see for himself!'

I chose this exchange to open my article because it reveals a common moral imagination about migration full of ambiguities and tensions. On one hand, because migration is connected to structural economic crises that push certain social strata to a marginal position and block their life course projects, it is frequently perceived (certainly by Abdul) as a way out, as an escape. In this view, the expectation is that migration will necessarily lead to success. On the other hand, migration is also interpreted (as Moina was trying to make his friend recall) as an experience that can lead to personal and family crises: it is a dangerous and difficult path, filled with obstacles and challenges, that can lead to failure. The objective of this article is precisely to explore this ambiguity of the migratory imagination, based on research about Bangladeshi migration in Lisbon.

In the existing anthropological literature, the ambiguous perceptions of migration have been addressed from several points of view. One of these, for instance, is the way people reflect on notions of 'home' and 'away'. In these narratives, 'away' is frequently a source of both desire and anguish. Katy Gardner (1993), for instance, shows how in Sylhet, North-Eastern Bangladesh, home (*desh*) is seen as 'poor' and 'underdeveloped', although morally and religiously virtuous, while 'abroad' (*bidesh*) is wealthy but morally corrupt and dangerous. A similar ambivalence is described by Engseng Ho (2006) about the Yemeni Hadrami diaspora in which 'the outside, like the sea that sustains, is also a source of trouble, whence come powers that are hard to see and harder yet to contain'. Even in China 'the fever of going abroad' addressed by Mayfair Yang (1997) implies 'the fear of being corrupted by alien outside forces, of losing one's self and identity'. This same ambiguity is expressed in the suffering of the migrant and its 'double absence'. He is neither here nor there and this *deracinement* is frequently a source of anguish and anxiety, as discussed by Sayad (1999) for the Algerian case. My own proposal, as far as Bangladeshi are concerned, is to interpret this ambiguity with their notions of success and failure, that is, through the very categories – the patron and the madman – with which my research assistants discuss the ambiguities surrounding migration.

In order to explore these ideas, I will begin with a simple description of the paradoxical predicament of Bangladeshi middle class young men and their expectations of migration. The second section is about the routes out of Bangladesh and the ways my research assistants perceive their position in Europe. Although many do become successful, all are constantly reminded that failure is close and very real. These two possibilities are revealed in two ideal-typical figures: the '*patrão*' (the Portuguese word for 'patron' or 'boss') and the madman. In the third section, I show how these two characters reveal the dialectic relation between normality and crisis, and are part and parcel of an imagined migration experience.

## Migration and the middle class in Bangladesh

As the initial vignette implies, most of my research assistants come from what has been roughly called by several agents in Bangladesh the 'new' and 'affluent' Bangladeshi 'middle classes'. This is a very difficult segment to define with precise contours but it

seems to be a heterogeneous group, both rural and urban, with high levels of education and economic capital. They come from families that have properties and own businesses in several sectors of the Bangladeshi economy. Furthermore, other members of their domestic units in Bangladesh work in private or state-owned companies and even NGOs as superior officers and administrative personnel. Simultaneously, my research assistants have relatively long educational backgrounds – most finished high school and some have university degrees – and most of them are fluent in English (see also Van Schendel 2009). But what, then, is the relation between such social segments and migration?

In the last decades, the liberalisation of Bangladeshi economy represented an increasing private investment in several sectors (Shahidullah 1985; Kochanek 2002). These changes led to the enlargement of the ‘middle classes’ that are not only dependent on private capital and non-government agencies but also invested in education as a project of social mobility and reproduction. For these intermediate strata, education is frequently perceived as the access routes to ‘white collar’ jobs and the consumption practices characteristic of ‘modernity’. In spite of such efforts, the younger generation face many obstacles to obtain a job, at least a job they consider worthy – the unemployment rates severely affect the young and educated (Osmani 2005) – and this has immediate consequences for their life course projects. They cannot contribute to the parents’ household nor marry and constitute their own household and consequently their access to adulthood is blocked.

So in a certain way, their expectations regarding the future have been hindered, especially if they stay in Bangladesh. As James Ferguson (2006) describes for middle class Zambians, ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ is something that will not necessarily arrive with the passage of time and for most of my research assistants from Bangladesh the future is totally uncertain.

Facing such a predicament, participation in other avenues of the global labour markets, namely in *bidesh*, which can be translated as ‘abroad’ or ‘foreign lands’ (Gardner 1993; Kotalová 1993), is seen as a way to overcome such vulnerabilities (Rozario and Gow 2003). To migrate is an opportunity to earn the so-called *bideshi takas*, literally foreign money (Garbin 2004), essential for the consumption of ‘modernity’, the reproduction of their parent’s household and the constitution of new ones. It is also one of the only opportunities to reach adulthood.

Such perceptions are fostered by a *culture of migration* (Massey *et al.* 1993) inspired and supported on the secular Sylheti migration to the UK (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Gardner 1995), where *londonis* and their *pucca* (stone) households in North-Eastern Bangladesh are considered examples of success. Furthermore, government discourses reproduce the idea that remittances occupy a central role in the Bangladeshi economy and accordingly develop several initiatives in order to increase the investment of *probashis* in their *desh* (home) – all producing an image of the migrant as an agent of modernisation and development. Together with this, it is also important to mention the role of the private industry of labour recruitment to several countries in the world (*adam bepari*), that has made *bidesh* within reach of thousands (Siddiqui 2002; Zeitlyn 2006).

Therefore, for the young of middle and low middle classes migration is frequently perceived as an imagined route out of personal, household and even national economic crises. As Imtiaz Ahmed (2000) argued, ‘working and living abroad becomes a lifetime goal for many’. But going to *bidesh* is a journey with many difficulties and obstacles.

## A risky passage

Ideally, the UK is the most desired destination (as usually occurs between former colonial and colonised countries) but is very hard to reach due to strict control of its borders. Furthermore, many of my research assistants were not part of networks that could support them in the first place and thus other destinations had to be considered such as Saudi Arabia or Japan. This was only possible because after the oil crises, in 1973, an industry of labour recruitment (*adam bepari*) developed, linking Bangladesh to the Middle East and Asia (Siddiqui 2004; Van Schendel 2009). Thus, several of my research assistants first migrated to Japan, Malaysia or Saudi Arabia and only after accumulating enough social capital, tried to move to continental Europe – which is perceived as a much more attractive destination than the Middle Eastern countries, for instance, because it is considered more wealthy, more educated and where living conditions are not so hard. In some cases, it is even possible to get residence visas and nationality (see also Knights 1997; Knights and King 1998). This migration usually occurs through three routes: (1) the more economically capitalised were able to buy Schengen visas – up to €6000 in informal markets<sup>2</sup> – with the help of intermediaries (*dalals*) and soon joined friends and relatives in continental Europe; (2) others followed a step-by-step process that would take them from Bangladesh to the Middle East, from there to North Africa and then across the Mediterranean; and (3) a third possibility was to cross to Europe over land routes through Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Knights 1997; Knights and King 1998).

All of these routes represent different risks and dangers, of course. For instance, in 2004, several Bangladeshi migrants died in the Mediterranean while trying to cross to Italy. Some were saved by the Algerian navy and repatriated and months afterwards the news coverage in the media caused a significant debate about the risks under which *probashis* try their luck abroad (Zeytlin 2006).

For those able to reach continental Europe, though, instead of a land of plenty, *bidesh* becomes a land of dangers and threats. Bangladeshis who are now in Lisbon first went to Germany, the Netherlands or France, where many were ‘undocumented’, either because they arrived clandestinely or because their Schengen visas expired. This ‘undocumentation’ left them vulnerable to deportation regimes and therefore was a source of anguish and fear (see also Jackson 2009). These fears extend even to other areas of social life, such as the stealing of organs in public hospitals, as described by Sarró (2007), about Guinean migrants in Portugal, or the simple fear of seeing a doctor.

The decision of my research assistants to move to Portugal – as well as to other Southern European countries – was related to their attempt to overcome such vulnerabilities through gaining access to the regularisation programmes carried out by the authorities.<sup>3</sup> In these ways, they were able to protect themselves from deportation regimes.

- 2 This is an investment where several members of the household participate and in some cases land is sold to support the expenses. It is, as Ballard (1994) has shown, a family entrepreneurial decision and thus it is absolutely imperative that it brings some return, frequently in the shape of economic or social remittances (Levitt 2001).
- 3 In Portugal alone, there were three extraordinary regularisations of undocumented migrants (1993, 1996, 2001) and in total more than two thousand Bangladeshis legalised on those occasions (the numbers of registrations in the Bangladesh Consular office in Portugal indicate four thousand five

But the problem is not simply related with their legal status but also with the places they can occupy in the labour market, such as street cleaning, peddling or construction work. In these, they are highly vulnerable to employers' abuses, such as working longer hours, without contracts and in some extreme cases unable to claim their salaries. Furthermore, many of these occupations are highly stigmatizing and something they would refuse to do back home and thus they take pains to deter their relatives in Bangladesh from knowing about it (see also Osella and Osella 2000). It would be shameful for them and their families if they were seen selling counterfeited DVDs in street markets in the outskirts of Lisbon.

So coming to continental Europe implies a structural ambivalence in the routes followed and also in the social positions occupied. Geographic mobility, in such a context, is not only movement through space but also, and sometimes quite dramatically, through social positions (Wolf 1982). And this is something people are quite aware. As one of my research assistant said quite angrily: "Here we're poor, right?!" as if saying that in Europe they are unimportant and invisible, little people or *choto manusch* in Bangla.<sup>4</sup>

## The patron and the madman

Facing such a predicament, the migration process can either become a success or, on the contrary, an absolute failure, and during my fieldwork these two possibilities were continuously present, either explicit or implicitly, in two figures: the 'patrão', which is the Portuguese word for patron or boss, and its opposite, the *pagol manusch*, the madman.

The 'patrão' is the successful migrant, success measured by his achievements. First of all he has his own business, he is his own boss, no longer depends on others to make a living. Just in down-town Lisbon it is possible to find up to 150 businesses owned by Bangladeshis, 20 per cent of which are linked to five pioneer Bangladeshis, considered, to a certain extent, examples of success.

Furthermore, the patron is already married, usually in Bangladesh, and has his own household in Portugal. All my research assistants migrated single and as soon as they became legal, travelled to the *desh* to get married. Their wife usually stays with the husband's parents until he is able to save enough money to bring her to Portugal. This implies renting or buying an apartment in Portugal and taking care of all bureaucratic issues and travel arrangements. Just in 2008, more than 160 families were reunited in Portugal. Today (April 2011), there are three hundred.

hundred). Currently (2011), there is a new process of regularisation being carried out and new *probashis* are arriving, even in a context of generalised economic crisis.

4 In Bangladesh, there is a growing awareness of these risks and dangers. In the past years several campaigns have been organised to inform and protect potential migrants. In a conversation in the outskirts of Dhaka, one of my interviewees told me: 'I don't want to go to Europe because I will be doing all sorts of work Europeans do not want to do. Furthermore, I will work longer hours and earn very small amounts of money. At least here (in Bangladesh) I have a car of my own, servants, etc.' He later admitted, though, that he had a son working abroad who was sending money back home. It is clear that although everybody seems aware of the difficulties involved, it is far worse to stay where they are.

But being successful is not just about one's achievements but also about moral imperatives. He has to be a 'good' provider, that is, someone who is co-responsible for his relatives, either in Portugal or in Bangladesh (see also Khanum 2001). He earns enough money to keep his wife at home, according to respectful middle class *purdah* rules, to pay for the studies of his children and younger siblings but also send remittances to his parent's household in Bangladesh, so they can have, as far as possible, a more comfortable old age. The sponsorship of rituals, such as the feast of sacrifice or *Qurbani Eid* (sometimes sponsored in Bangladesh and organised in Portugal), the lavish visits during holidays, in which gifts and loans are redistributed among relatives, the investment in properties, are just a few more examples. Being successful, then, is intimately linked to this idea of sharing, redistribution and co-responsibility towards the joint household and its members wherever they are. In spite of the fact that many of these patrons have their households in Lisbon, they continue to be a part of the joint household, the centre of which is their parents household in Bangladesh, until, at least, their parents die.<sup>5</sup>

Having said this, being successful also implies ethical issues. One should not be successful at the cost of one's fellow-countrymen, for instance. On the contrary, one's success is directly proportional to the sacrifices made to protect and serve other Bangladeshis in Portugal, less capable of doing so by themselves. This implies helping recently arrived migrants with paper work or solving problems with the Portuguese authorities or simply creating institutions for the 'community', such as mosques or cultural associations.

Finally, the patron reveals the dynamics of the production of adulthood and masculinity (all patrons are male!). They left Bangladesh young, immature and single and are now adults. It is also a highly gendered narrative where marriage, family, migration and success are all elements that reveal and produce the 'good', responsible and adult male.

The *madman*, on the other hand, encapsulates failure in its most extreme form. The category is usually applied to those whom my research assistants' describe as having 'lost touch with reality'. These, according to my research assistants, discourses, are a consequence of the difficulties faced along the migration process. The anguish of not being able to return, due to lack of documentation, of being now 'poor' and 'little' people, of being vulnerable and afraid of going out because of deportation, or simply being unable to send money back home, when everybody is expecting it, is unbearable and stressful, leading to extreme forms of psychological distress. All these are perceived as failure and the question many ask themselves is: why have I not been able to succeed where so many have achieved at least some success?

Furthermore, *bidesh*, in this case Portugal, is a morally corrupt place, where all kinds of illicit and forbidden practices, such as drugs, adultery, pre-marital sex and alcohol, are constantly calling to migrants who must 'fight' them off. Those who do not, according to some religious discourses, jeopardise the whole migration process and become in permanent crisis.

The madmen were extreme examples of failure that encapsulate all these threats. They were present figures; they slept in the same neighbourhood where one could find the majority of Bangladeshi businesses and households, the so called *banglapara*, either

5 After which, and according to the domestic group cycle (Fortes 1971), the brothers create their own autonomous households.

in the street or in the Bangladeshi mosque. They ate in the Bangladeshi restaurants, as charity, and thus were constant reminders that normality can turn to crisis in a very short time. The three cases of ‘madmen’ I followed up during my fieldwork in Portugal were eventually repatriated to Bangladesh, with the active support of the most successful migrants. The latter collected money to buy the airfare, provided the necessary documents to travel and sent a significant contribution to the families back home. A curious dialectics of visibility and invisibility occurred: by making their success visible both in Portugal and in Bangladesh, their action also turned invisible the continuous reminder of failure that these madmen embodied. Failure is, to a certain extent, sent back home precisely by those that are able to mobilise enough capital to make it invisible, therefore reinforcing the visibility of their success.

It is among the Bangladeshis that arrived in 2001 and more recently, also called *bachelors*, that these risks of failure are more felt. For them, migration is still an uncertain experience. It can either become a success or a total failure and the patron and madmen are constant reminders of their possible future. They are considered, by older migrants, as immature and still irresponsible and thus someone that might eventually lose the ‘correct’ path.

## Concluding remarks

Throughout this article, I argued that crisis is imagined differently according to the social location in the migratory map. For those in Bangladesh, namely lower middle class, like Abdul, migration to Europe is a way to escape from a predicament marked by crises in the economy, life course and consumption.

Among those already abroad, in this case Portugal, there are three ways of producing an imagination of crisis: for the ‘patron’, migration is a triumphant narrative that implied moments of crisis that were eventually overcome. Crisis was a step in the production of success and normality;<sup>6</sup> for the recently arrived, the *bachelor*, migration is a continuously ambiguous experience because it can either become a success story or on the contrary a total failure. Finally, there are the ones for whom migration became a permanent crisis.<sup>7</sup> The stories of the *paghol manusch* can be seen as moral tales that reveal the dangers surrounding the immigration experience. To a certain extent, they are similar to the South African figure, discussed by Jean and John Comaroff (1987). This silent man ‘spoke’ about the dangers faced in the cities and in the railways. Likewise, the stories of those who became mad among Bangladeshis in Portugal alert all others that success is not around the corner. As Foucault (1972) argued, the madman is a figure that is part and parcel of a difficult knowledge. In this case, he is the constant reminder that failure and crisis can become normal life and at the same time is a strong normative statement about the exemplary, successful migrant: the patron.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Simone Frangella, Ramon Sarró, João de Pina Cabral, Ruy Blanes and the anonymous reviewer for comments and suggestions. All inaccuracies are the sole responsibility of the author.

6 See Pina Cabral (2009) for a reflection about crisis and the production of normality.

7 See Vigh (2008) for an interpretation of crisis as normality.

José Manuel Fraga Mapril  
 CRIA-IUL  
 Anthropolog  
 Lisbon  
 Portugal  
 jmapril@gmail.com

## References

- Ahmed, I. 2000. *The construction of diaspora: South Asians living in Japan*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Ballard, Roger (coord). 1994. *Desh pardesh: the South Asian presence in Britain*. Nova Deli: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Comaroff J. and J. Comaroff, 1987. 'The madman and the migrant: work and labour in the historical consciousness of a South African people', *American Ethnologist* 14 (2): 191–209.
- Ferguson, James 2006. *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fortes, M. 1971 (1958). Introduction in J. Goody (ed.), *The developmental cycle in domestic groups*, 1–14. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1972. *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Garbin, D. 2004. *Migrations, territoires diasporiques et politiques identitaires: Bengalis musulmans entre Banglatown et Sylhet*. Tours: Université François Rabelais.
- Gardner, K. 1993. 'Desh bidesh: Sylheti images of home and away', *Man* 28 (1): 1–15.
- Gardner, K. 1995. *Global migrants, local lives: travel and transformation in rural Bangladesh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, K. and A. Shukur 1994. 'I'm Bengali, I'm Asian and I'm living here': the changing identity of British Bengalis, in R. Ballard (ed.), *Desh pardesh: the South Asian presence in Britain*, 142–164. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Ho, E. 2006. *The graves of Tarim: genealogy and mobility across the Indian ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jackson, M. 2009. 'The shock of the new: on migrant imaginaries and critical transitions', *Ethnos* 73 (1): 57–72.
- Khanum, S. 2001. 'The household patterns of a Bangladeshi village in England', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27 (3): 489–504.
- Knights, M. 1997. Migrants as networkers: the economics of Bangladeshi migration to Rome, in R. King and R. Black (eds), *Southern Europe and the new immigrations*, 113–37. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Knights, M. and R. King 1998. 'The geography of Bangladeshi migration to Rome', *International Journal of Population Geography* 4 (4): 299–321.
- Kochanek, S. 2002. The growing commercialization of power, in R. Jahan (ed.), *Bangladesh: promise and performance*, 149–80. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Kotalová, J. 1993. *Belonging to others: cultural construction of womanhood in a village in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Levitt, P. 2001. *The transnational villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Massey, Douglas S., Joaquín Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adele Pellegrino and J. Edward Taylor 1993. 'Theories of international migration: a review and appraisal', *Population and Development Review* 19 (3): 431–66.
- Osella, F. and C. Osella 2000. *Social mobility in Kerala: modernity and identity in conflict*. London: Pluto Press.
- Osmani, S. 2005. *The impact of globalization on poverty in Bangladesh*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- Pina Cabral, P. 2009. 'Qual wise? Normalide e quebra sistémica na contemporaneidade. Paper presented at the international workshop 'Respostas á Crise', Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, 12–13 November.



- Rozario, S. and J. Gow 2003. Bangladesh: return migration and social transformation, in R. Iredale, F. Guo and S. Rozario (eds.), *Return migration in the Asia Pacific*, 47–87. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Sarró, R. 2007. 'Organos vitales e metáforas mortales: um relato sobre hospitales e diáspora africana en Lisboa', *Revista de Antropologia Social* 16: 325–48.
- Sayad, A. 1999. *La double absence: des illusions de l'émigre aux souffrances de l'immigré*. Paris: Seuil.
- Shahidullah, M. 1985. Class formation and class relations in Bangladesh, in Dale Johnson (ed.), *Middle classes in dependent countries*, 137–64. London: Sage Publications.
- Siddiqui, T. 2002. *Beyond the maze: streamlining labour recruitment process in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: RMMRU.
- Siddiqui, T. 2004. *Institutionalising diaspora linkage: the emigrant Bangladeshi in UK and USA*. Dhaka: IOM.
- Van Schendel, W. 2009. *A history of Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vigh, H. 2008. 'Crisis and chronicity: anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and decline,' *Ethnos* 73 (1): 5–24.
- Wolf, E. 1982. *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yang, M. 1997. Mass media and transnational subjectivity in Shanghai: notes on (re)cosmopolitanism in a Chinese metropolis, in D. Nonini and A. Ong (eds.), *Ungrounded empires: the cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism*, 287–322. London: Routledge.
- Zeitlyn, Benjamin 2006. *Migration from Bangladesh to Italy and Spain*. Dhaka: RMMRU.