

Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: Adaptation Strategies in an Ethnically Distant Destination

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to explore the adaptation-related challenges that Bangladeshi migrant workers in Hong Kong face and the strategies they adopt to triumph over them. Data were collected through administering both closed and open-ended questionnaires to 56 migrant workers in Hong Kong during 2005–2006. The study revealed that most of the respondents stayed in Hong Kong legally but worked illegally because of the fact that although they could extend their stay permits, they were not granted work permits. This exclusive circumstance places them in a number of difficult situations. In attempting to adapt to Hong Kong society, they embrace a number of interesting and unique strategies to surmount challenges.

BACKGROUND

Due to the non-existence of a bilateral labour export-import agreement between Hong Kong and Bangladesh, a sizeable number of potential migrant workers (MW) try to get to this city with tourist permits, sometimes as transient and sometimes as tourists. Therefore, their adaptation strategies are not same as others who set off for work elsewhere under agreements. Until December 2006, since the handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese authority in 1997 (Raghubir, 1999), Bangladeshi citizens were not required to obtain a visa before they travelled to Hong Kong. They were normally granted a two weeks' permit for ingress on arrival at the airport. Migrants with a tourist visa were not allowed to extend the permit while in Hong Kong; they had to leave Hong Kong to get their visa extended. They preferred to leave to Shenzhen in PR China (nearest to Hong Kong) rather than Macao because of the relatively lower travel cost. On return from Shenzhen or Macao, most of them were offered extensions of around seven days or even less and some were denied. Eventually, those who obtained extensions ended up staying put in Hong Kong legally.

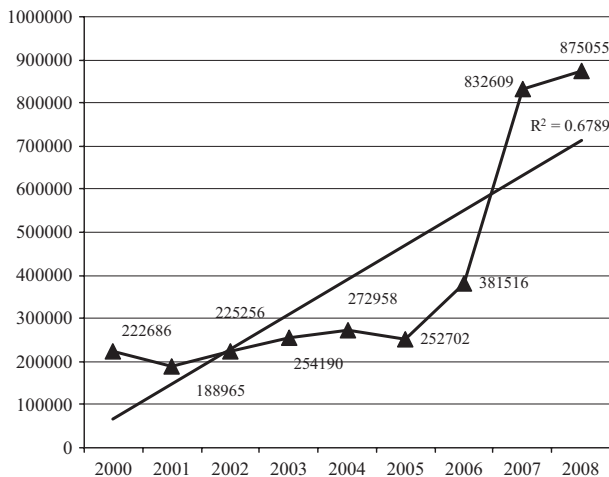
Hong Kong maintains strong surveillance system over the in- and out-flow of population. Therefore, this population group has to be sneaky about obtaining work because they are distinct from the Hong Kongers by colour, language and so on. Hence, MWs face a number of challenges in adapting to the new environment, obtaining work and simply continuing to stay. This paper aims to investigate those challenges and how they are surmounted. In classical sociology, assimilation means a progressive change from a more diverse to a less diverse behaviour. Assimilation theory is

* The American University in Cairo.

more applicable for longer term or permanent migrants. However, these migrants, at the outset, do not usually move to Hong Kong to stay permanently. They move there because they have an idea that they could easily enter European countries by using Hong Kong as a transit point. While they are trying to get to Europe, they look for work in Hong Kong. Alba Nee (2003:30–31) defines assimilation as the attenuation of distinctions based on ethnic origin. This theory has become applicable, in Southeast Asia, specifically to the Bangladeshi diasporas in Malaysia. These diasporas assimilated into the multiethnic community in Penang in Malaysia and put down roots (Nayeem, 2008). While to Park (1930) the socio-political theory of integration is a progressive phenomenon, Warner and Srole (1945) consider that migrants’ behaviour would eventually become similar to that of the natives. This paradigm has been influenced by the integration experience of migrant abroad, despite their very different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background (Palo et al., 2007).

In recent years, migrants from Asian countries have become remarkably visible on the global stage (Chantavanich and Risser, 2000:14; Skeldon, 2000:370; Castles and Miller, 2003:7; IOM, 2008), and the volume, direction and composition of migration flows have changed enormously during the post-1945 period (Appleyard, 1989:22). Today international migration has been one of the most dynamic policy issues in the Bangladesh economy (Chin, 2002)¹ due to the fact that migrants’ remittances contribute greatly to the country’s balance of payments and to the GDP, which was around 9 per cent in 2008 (World Bank, 2009). Therefore, this labour-rich but resource-poor country sends huge number of skilled and unskilled workers overseas (Figure 1). Countries in the Middle East have been one of the major destinations for Bangladeshi migrants since 1970s. Since the mid 1990s, potential migrants have in part shifted their direction towards East and South-east Asia (Oishi, 2002; Hasan, 2000:40; Rudnick, 1995; Ullah, 2009). However, government records show that Bangladesh has been receiving remittances from Hong Kong for a long time. From the financial years 1998–9 until 2008–9, Bangladesh has been receiving remittances amounting on average to US\$5.5 million every year. Although it was US\$8.1 and US\$7.9 million in the financial years 2006–07 and 2007–08 respectively (Bangladesh Bank, 2009), no official data were available on the number of migrants from Bangladesh to Hong Kong. MWs in Hong Kong generally constitute three categories: domestic, construction, and those in the employment pool created by the Supplementary Labour Scheme. Southeast Asian migration flow to Hong Kong is currently

FIGURE 1
TOTAL RECORDED MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH (2000–2008). SOURCE: BMET, 2009



dominated by Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs) (Hewison, 2003) i.e. almost one-fourth of the migrant workers are represented by them and the majority are from the Philippines, followed by Indonesia and Thailand (HK immigration, 2009; Li, Findlay and Jones, 1998:191), while Bangladesh's representation is the smallest (Census and Statistics Department, 2008).

The migration of Bangladeshi labourers is explained by a range of factors. According to the oldest theory of migration, neo-classical economic theory, wage differentials between regions are the primary factors embedded in labour migration. Such factors are due to the differences in geographic spheres and in demand and supply. It could generally be argued according to neo-classical economics that countries with a shortage of labour relative to capital have a high average wage, whereas countries with a relatively high labour supply have a low average wage. Due to these wage differences, labour flows from Bangladesh are to high-wage countries. Thus Hong Kong emerged as one of the destinations in the East Asian region for Bangladeshi labourers. Migration, often said to be a resultant of globalization, has been prominent in the development discourse in Bangladesh in the last few decades, as it is related to the direct inflow of foreign exchanges as remittance. As the volume of imports dominates over exports in Bangladesh's turbulent economy, remittances also play a significant part in paying import dues. While emigrations can easily be explained by simple static models, where the driving force is wage differentials between regions, re-migrations occur despite persistently favourable conditions in the host countries (Adda et al., 2006). Though a sizable number of Bangladeshis have been living in Hong Kong for some time, no initiative to maintain records is as yet underway.

Hong Kong is inhabited by a number of ethnic minorities, the major ones being Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesians, Indians and Thais. Despite the long evidence of migration from Bangladesh to Hong Kong, it remains an under-emphasized issue which has not received any attention by scholars; it might be because of the non-existence of any "G" to "G" agreement. This is due partly to the fact that Hong Kong is not a major, primary destination for the Bangladeshi workers. However, Bangladeshi people still sneak into Hong Kong "in search of opportunities", producing undocumented migrants there.

Whatever the destination of the Bangladeshi migrant population, they face the challenge of adaptation. Realistically, migrants re-optimize and revise their choices during and after their migration. One may argue whether their strategies to adapt to Hong Kong society are different from their strategies in other societies where Bangladeshis live. Very little is known about the adaptation pattern of this population group in Hong Kong because, to my knowledge, no pertinent research was available before today. According to the assimilationist proponents, migrants cannot bring about significant social and political changes in the receiving society (Castles, 2003:11; Stouffer, 1940:847) but "assimilation" means "to become alike" and the ambiguity about "like" whom and in what way remained until 1964, when Milton Gordon distinguished between cultural and structural assimilation (Pedraza, 2005). Cultural assimilation entails a process of acculturation on the part of the immigrants, of becoming "alike" in cultural patterns, such as language, behavior, and values; while structural assimilation results only when the immigrants had been "taken up and incorporated" and entails the full integration of the immigrants and their descendants into the major institutions of the society (educational, occupational, political) (Gordon, 1964).

Harr (2007). in her study on social networks in Brazil. argues that migrants generally exchange emotional and psychological issues between individuals and that the moderating effect on mental well-being is more pronounced among those experiencing the highest level of stressors and is directly related to the individual's quality of life (Achat et al., 1998:735-744). Upon initial arrival, migrants tend to focus on cultural differences; however, the longer they reside in the host culture, the more cultural similarities are perceived (Harr, 2007). As migrants' intercultural experiences accumulate over time, they become more confident about the interaction patterns and their positive effect on the host country becomes greater. Participation in the larger social system of the host society is vital for the acculturation of the migrant (Kim, 1978; Bhagat, 1999; Caliguiri, 2000).

Social support systems are crucial to the adaptation and adjustment of a migrant and act as a stress reliever and source of strength, as migrants often leave behind the relationships that provided security and comfort (Ahearn, 1995). Borne out by the existing research that, whether documented or undocumented, migrants continuously adopt strategies as a way of adapting themselves to their destinations in order to avail themselves of opportunities and compete with natives in the labour market. Strategies vary across destinations; however the strategies adopted by the Bangladeshi migrants in Hong Kong are obviously idiosyncratic.

Adaptation theory, therefore, is more germane in this case, as the question of assimilation into Hong Kong society for a Bangladeshi labourer is almost absurd. Bangladeshis who migrate to Hong Kong adopt unique strategies to cope with challenges. Pluss (2005), who studied the combined characteristics of Indians in Hong Kong rooted in different cultures and regions while adapting to, and differentiating themselves from, British and Chinese residents, agreed on the shortage of research. This study is intended to fill in this vacuum.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION

Strategically located in the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region, Hong Kong is one of the unique societies in Asia because of its significant historical reliance on migrant workers for its growing economies (Hewison, 2004:318–9). Unlike the more ethnically homogenous societies of the other high-performing East Asian countries, Hong Kong has been remarkably receptive to foreigners, reflecting in part their historical migration roots (Ullah, 2008; Athukorala and Manning, 1999:112). Ho, Lui and Lam (1991:18) point out that Hong Kong was concerned over the emigration and the brain drain in the early 1990s, however, by the mid-1990s, the focus had shifted to that of immigration due to its persistent shortage of labour in the market (Chiu, 2001:185–6). In terms of ethnic composition, Hong Kong is essentially a Chinese community (95 per cent of the total population being Chinese). The issue of ethnic identity is particularly salient in the context of Hong Kong. The territory is an integral part of China and most of its residents are either descendants of migrants from China or were themselves born in China. Many Chinese traditions and practices are maintained in the territory, with Cantonese being the common daily language and traditional Chinese festivals being widely celebrated. Yet, the different paths which Hong Kong and China have taken since the colonization of the former have resulted in differences in lifestyle and in other cultural characteristics between the two places (Li et al., 1995).

The number of foreign domestic helpers (FDH) grew from less than 9,000 per year before 1987 to 28,000 in 1992 and 32,000 in 1993 (APMRN, 2005). The total stock of foreign nationals rose from 134,000 in 1981 to 321,000 in 1993, and then to above 400,000 by March in 1995 (Skeldon, 1995 cited in Athukorala and Manning, 1999:124; Census Statistics Department, 1992:54–5;68–69). In 1997 the stock of foreign workers from Asian countries increased to 436,000 while there were 121,000 from Western countries (Stahl, 2003:33). Ho, Lui and Lam (1991:13) estimate that Filipinos form 90 per cent of total FDHs in Hong Kong. Countries or areas with more than one million foreign-born people in 2005 were Australia; Hong Kong, China; the Islamic Republic of Iran; Japan; Malaysia; Singapore, Thailand, Turkey and Uzbekistan. In Hong Kong the foreign-born population constitutes around 44 per cent of the total population (Hewison, 2003).² Johnston and colleagues (2006) however argue that such concentrations of mixed ethnic minorities in fact manifests a wish among their members to live in close proximity in order to sustain their cultural identity and practices – the latter being extended by the process of chain migration, whereby those already settled in a city sponsor family members and friends to join them, in many cases helping them to find homes within the same neighbourhood. Lal (1997:393) argues that ethnicity may serve as cultural capital if members can draw on the prestige enshrined in ethnic networks, presenting themselves as the custodians of certain traditions, norms, values, skills and ways of doing things to

gain access to resources. The erosion of social networks which comprise the nuclear and extended family, friends, bosses, subordinates, etc., represents an important loss.

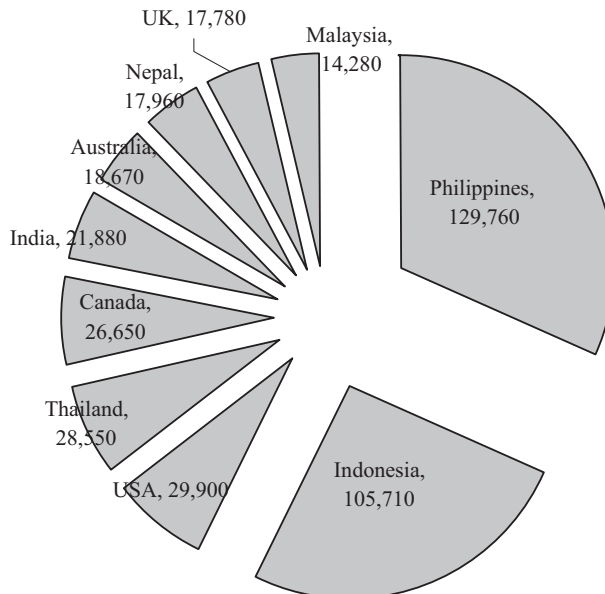
These networks allow people to develop a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of “sociality” and worthiness. The idea of social context affecting the individual’s psyche is a reminder that refugee problems warrant interdisciplinary debate. The reconstruction of a familiar social context needs to take account of culture, because acculturation has often been an added problem for displaced people and refugees. Kovacev and Shute (2004) argue here that acculturation is a psychological and social phenomenon which happens at the level of both the individual and the group to which s/he belongs. The attack on two fronts considerably diminishes the survival chances of the alien culture.

Bangladesh is absolutely a sending country, where some 98 per cent of the population is Bengalis. About 12 tribes inhabiting the Chittagong Hill Tracts, collectively totalling less than one million people out of approximately 150 million, are ethnically distinct from the Bengalis. About 250,000 of the national population consists of Biharis, non-Bengali Muslims who migrated from India to what was then East Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Almost 89 per cent of Bengalis are Muslims, around 10 per cent are Hindus, and the remaining 1 per cent comprises Buddhists, Catholics and Protestants, meaning Bangladesh is not a religiously diverse and balanced country. Of the Muslims 95 per cent are Sunnis while 3 per cent are Shias and rest are Ahmadis (BBS, 2008).

The nature of ethnic identity, however, is controversial. Previous literature refers to the “primordial” versus “instrumental” dichotomy in the interpretations of ethnic feelings (Scott, 1990). The primordial approach conceptualizes ethnic identity as innately given, deeply rooted and basically unchangeable (van den Berghe, 1978) while the instrumental position emphasizes the flexibility of ethnic sentiment. The “social construction” of “race”, advocated by some geographers such as Jackson and Penrose (1993), is typical of such a position. Ethnic differentiation is not innately inherited but constructed and reproduced through fundamentally political processes. Consequently, alternative

FIGURE 2

ETHNIC COMPOSITION IN HONG KONG (EXCEPT 95 PER CENT CHINESE). SOURCE: AMC INFO BANK, 2005



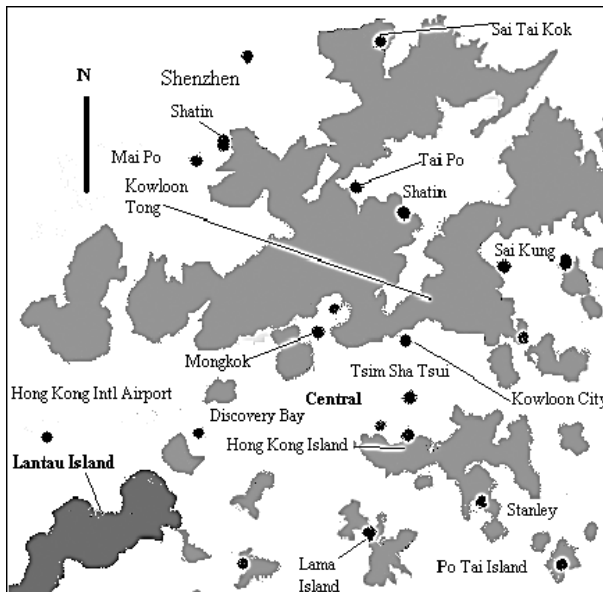
“constructions” of group identity are possible under different circumstances. Chan (1998) argues that “race” is a cultural construct, while Sparks (1978) points out that ethnicity is a process which involves the “creation, invocation, and manipulation of notions.

Adaptations of MWs into the cultures of the host countries have been a major subject of academic research for long years (Johnston et al., 2006). While assimilation focuses on members of one group adopting the cultural patterns of the majority or host culture, acculturation focuses on the impact that the two cultures have on each other (Zeng, 2004; Richard and Victor, 1997). Adaptations, acculturations, assimilations and integrations are distinct concepts; nevertheless they are not unconnected because they all supplement each other in explaining certain phenomena. In conceptualizing adaptations in relation to the study of Bangladeshi migrants in Hong Kong, integration and assimilation will be theoretically explicated. The concept of assimilation has been debated extensively in the social science of migration since the early 20th century, but it is now broadly accepted as a way to explain how migrants change as they come into contact with their host society. In its current usage this concept does not imply any superiority in the host society’s views or a particular value to the changes in attitudes and behaviour among immigrants across generation (Cuellar et al., 1997; Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). Since this study intends basically to look into how the Bangladeshi MWs in Hong Kong obtain work by strategizing their adaptation approach, I will narrow the focus in this framework to adaptation strategies.

DATA SOURCE AND ANALYSIS

This study draws information from both primary and secondary sources. As a primary source, questionnaire surveys were conducted. Both closed and open-ended questionnaires was administered for this purpose from November 2004 to January 2006.

MAP 1
MAP OF HONG KONG



Data were collected from the most popular spots for the Bangladeshi migrants to gather for seeking work, i.e., Sham Shui Po, Tsim Sha Tsui and Central Star Ferry areas in Hong Kong. A total of 56 migrants were interviewed. Comparing interviewees' accounts and evaluating them in relation to written sources served to assess the validity of information. Respecting the wishes of some interviewees not to be named, all interviewees were anonymous. Archive research was conducted in the Hong Kong Collection of the City University of Hong Kong. Data on migration flows from Bangladesh to overseas countries have been collected from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in Bangladesh. This source provided data on the extent of annual migration from Bangladesh, skill composition, volume and flow of remittances, and the countries of destination. However, there is very little information on Bangladeshi migrants in Hong Kong. There is no data with BMET on how many Bangladeshi migrants are staying in Hong Kong although some information on remittances was available. Literature on the relevant issues and newspaper were reviewed.

The sample is highly skewed towards male migrants, as cultural constraint and government policies discourage female migration. Any study initiative on Bangladeshi female migration will probably have this inherent limitation of lack of proportional [to male counterpart] female samples, especially when migration research focuses on labour. Roughly, more than fifteen thousand Bangladeshis stay in Hong Kong. Around half of them have settled there as business people while the rest stay as temporary contractual workers. Due to the lack of government information, the author spent about six months estimating roughly the number of Bangladeshi net migrants³ in Hong Kong. With a view to validating the estimate the author redid the census and crosschecked with the information provided by the Bangladeshi community in Hong Kong and by labourers. Newspapers also reported the same number (Inqilab, 27 July, 2004). Assuming this number as population (N) the author has drawn the sample by applying appropriate statistical tools with 5 per cent of precision level, with a view to making the sample as random as possible.

ADAPTATION APPROACH AND STRATEGIES

Before the approaches to adaptation that MWs adopt in Hong Kong society are discussed, the profiles of the respondents will be presented, because an individual's age, education, civil status, length of stay overseas, and skills, determines their level of adaptability. About 26 per cent of the migrants were in the 25–30 age group, 31 per cent were aged 30–35, and 37 per cent were from the 35–40 age group. The mean age was 34.1 years, meaning most of the respondents were in their mid thirties. As for educational backgrounds, some 44 per cent had a primary level of education (1–5 years of schooling) followed by higher secondary level (37 per cent) (10–12 years of schooling), seven per cent had lower secondary level of education (6–10 years of schooling) and five per cent had university level education. Thirty-five per cent of them were married and 65 per cent unmarried. The mean household size of the migrants was 6.8 which was much higher (5.5) than the national mean household size (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics-BBS, 2008). The study demonstrated that 33 per cent of the migrants had a single income earner in their families and 59 per cent had two or multiple income earners, revealing a high dependency ratio as compared with the national level. The big culture shock originates from the wide gap between their original cultural spheres and the host ones. Probably the change is far beyond what the migrants might have expected and people in the new cultural milieu are bombarded with messages which are foreign to them. Another key dimension of the acculturation process, well noted in the literature, is the crisis of identity that the affected groups and individuals go through. Levine (2004) introduces the term *deculturation*. It is a situation dominated by confusion and anxiety within the individual and his/her group. The implications of the profiles in explaining adaptation lie in the fact that it is associated with spatial desegregation, thus those claiming dual ethnicities should be more likely to live

outside the areas of ethnic residential concentration than those who claim a separate identity from that of their host populations (Johnston et al., 2006; Fong and Gulia, 1999; Massey and Denton, 1985). The assumption is that new migrants are young people with limited resources who cluster together in low-income migrant enclaves (Logan, Alba, and Zhang, 2002) for both economic and social reasons (Myles and Feng, 2003), although Chinese immigration into Hong Kong differs little from previous waves of ingress. Every wave had an impact in changing the culture of Hong Kong, which long ago transcended the Anglo-Protestantism on which it was initially based; none of them has eroded basic constitutional institutions or freedoms (Levine, 2004).

The ethnographic study and observations bear out that Bangladeshi MWs generally gather together to look for work. The influx of Mainlanders into Hong Kong has implications for the adaptation strategies because the mainlanders' presence created a dramatic leap in job competition for the Bangladeshis. Hong Kongers tend to recruit the mainlanders due to the relative ease of communicating with compared with the Bangladeshis. Migrants generally attempt to integrate in different strata of host societies. Here, we notice that typically networks are seen as instrumental in creating social capital, including social relations, which in turn facilitate integration (Coleman, 1988). While ethnic networks may promote migrants initial integration, in the medium run they risk creating segmented enclaves with an ultimate negative effect on the process of integration (Palo et al., 2007; Conzen, 1990)

Common culture and common language better facilitate communication and efficient interaction between individuals. Consequently, migrants' integration into the mainstream culture of their host country is likely to increase their productivity and earnings. There is considerable amount of empirical research on the relationship between migrants' ability to adapt and their earnings (Simon, 2007). For many migrants to the destinations, limited proficiency in the language of the host nations becomes a formidable challenge to both economic and social integration into their new home. Those who speak the host language poorly are more superficially foreign than others, and this may contribute to their being discriminated against by the natives. Discrimination may cause migrants distress. Moreover, those with limited proficiency in the host language might self-segregate, compounding their social and economic isolation (Bleakley and Chin, 2007). The formation of ethnic enclaves can indeed limit the ability, and the incentive, to acquire fluency in the host country language and can also lead to the creation of a highly segmented labour market (Palo et al., 2007). Lazear (1999) however argues that this may not occur when the migrants' own community is large and when it is costly for them to learn the host country's culture and language. There is no shortage of evidence that with less proficiency in the host language, migrants lag behind in the job market or, if already in a job, receive relatively lower pay than the natives.

Therefore, gaining command of the local language became one of the common strategies Bangladeshi migrants adopt in Hong Kong to fit themselves into the receiving society more easily, in order to grab work opportunities. Most respondents learned Cantonese to communicate with the local people and the police. At the beginning they seek to learn Cantonese from their compatriots, relatives or friends or at any language teaching school. However, they don't always display their proficiency in speaking to police – if even they can. Inability to speak the language often helps them to escape from or avoid interrogation by the police. A vast majority of the respondents claimed to be able to speak some Cantonese. One-third can speak fluently and some others claimed to have conversational command of the spoken language. The length of stay was directly correlated to their level of language proficiency i.e. the longer they stay the greater was their proficiency in Cantonese. An overwhelming majority of them had little command of the English language. Each migrant decided how much effort to make in order to adapt to the mainstream culture of Hong Kong. If a migrant can adapt into the mainstream culture, s/he would probably earn a higher income than one who failed to adapt. However, in adapting more, they are likely to become closer to the natives when subject to interpersonal comparisons (Simon, 2007; Friedman and Randeria, 2004). A few spoke English fluently but with grammatical errors.

Adaptation is thought to take place through human capital enhancement: immigrants acquire skills that are specific to the destination country, including knowledge of the labour market and language proficiency, allowing them to improve their labour market outcomes relative to natives. The longer the process of adaptation takes, the less successful any cohort of migrants will be at any given time since arrival (Clark and Joanne, 2006). In general, migrants normally use ties of kinship established before they landed in Hong Kong to seek help in settling in and adapting to the new environment, arranging accommodation, learning the language and adjusting to the food and behaviour of local people. Kinship might be home, friendship- or neighborhood-based. These ties help initiate migration, obtain jobs, and at a later stage expand the adaptation repertoire (Khalaf and Al-kobaisi, 1999). The absorption of migrants, however, is very much dependent on the policies adopted by the host society in receiving the immigrants, and on the attitudes of the people most immediately affected. The rate of adaptation is influenced by a variety of factors such as economic status, level of education, and kinship ties. The first stage of what is often referred to as acculturation, is “a process whereby the members of a group acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other groups and – by sharing their experiences and history – are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (Johnston et al., 2006).

This section illustrates why Bangladeshi migrants adopt unique strategies to cope with Hong Kong society. Much has to do with their legal issues. *Shob taka ai hati palte shesh hoi-* (The elephant sucks all the money). This is a typical reply when they are asked why they stay put in Hong Kong. They call the “passport” an “elephant”. Ninety-three per cent of the respondents carried a tourist visa while the rest (7 per cent) claimed not to hold any visa or passport. Thirty-four per cent of them got to Hong Kong more than once for seeking work and 66 per cent travelled between 6 and 10 times. The study shows that around 10 per cent of the migrants’ visa had already expired. They used some self-developed terminologies. When they were asked “why?”, their reply was “*Eda amgo bhasha*” (this is our “own” language). For instance, they call the police *Mamu* (“uncle” in English). The reason was that Hong Kong police often carry out sudden raids in places known to be popular spots for Bangladeshi workers. Sometimes such raids yield a high number of illegal migrants arrested. In such a circumstance, compatriots send signal to others by saying “*mamura are here. Shabdhan!* (uncles are here, so be careful).

Ethnic groups experience structural assimilation, which is “the distribution of migrant ethnics through its system of occupation stratification” (Johnston et al., 1994:28). I argue that migrants accept any occupation in Hong Kong, whether they are 3D jobs (Dirty, Dangerous and Demeaning) or better, to cope with the competition in the labour market. Though most of the respondents were highly educated and their career history confirms that they were employed in professional jobs back in Bangladesh, they accept any kind of work offer in Hong Kong (see Ullah, 2007). It is generally believed that the citizens of the host countries accept migrants as “transient” for their own ends. When they are tagged “illegal”, the vulnerabilities tend to continue to increase, because of the inherent problem of manual work itself as a source of vulnerabilities and a range of indignities (Waddington, 2003:16). Most jobs offered to Bangladeshi migrants can be broadly categorized as contractual labour and as agents. Contractual labour, normally a part-time job with payment on an hourly basis, involves a wide variety of work; loading and unloading stuff for the wholesale shops, construction sites, and factories; cleaning houses; and often domestic help. A few have worked as agents of “fake”⁴ watch shops, hotels, and tailoring shops, the sort of work of which entails convincing clients (mostly foreign tourists) to buy the watches, to have suits made (at a charge normally much lower than in Europe and North America) and to stay in hostels/hotels. A good number of Bangladeshi migrants were found involved in such work on the streets of TsimShaTsui for commissions on every client in addition to a monthly lump-sum salary. Engaging in such occupations requires being smartly dressed; proficiency in English, and other languages is an additional qualification for salary enhancement. However, the labourers who worked at Sham Shui Po did not seek work at Tsim Sha Tsui, because they thought they were obviously not dressed smartly enough

to convince the clients. The study demonstrated that 72 per cent of the migrants worked as part-time contract labourers, hired on an hourly basis without any fixed rate. The payment depended on the wish of the work providers. Most of the workers were happy with the payment they normally received. The Hong Kong people who hired them knew the spots where the migrants congregated to seek work and picked them up from those spots. Here, it is worth mentioning the argument of Hum and Wayne (2005), that the conventional wisdom is that migrants face an initial disadvantage in the labour market i.e. the negative entry effect, but eventually catch up with the natives and even overtake them in certain cases – the positive adaptation effect. Phrased in this way, the question concerns the magnitude of the negative entry effect and the speed of the positive effect. The immigrants need to be sneaky while they wait on streets for offers of work. Their presence is visible. Patrol police often enquire about their reason for waiting on the street for so many hours. As a strategy they never reveal their primary purpose; rather they pretend to be waiting for friends. In some cases they fail to carry their passports when they waited on the street or street corners. In the event that police check their travel documents and they cannot produce them, the police arrest them. Many of the respondents report that their compatriots help them by fetching their passports from the residence, if any, to obtain release from custody. The police in this case collect and preserve their finger prints for future reference. The police already know they use multiple passports in different names. Astoundingly, on average one migrant holds five passports. Once they are arrested on any offence, the police check if the arrestees have been caught before. If so, they are put in jail for six months for a first offence, 18 months for repeat offenders.

About a decade ago, the categories of jobs offered to Bangladeshi migrants today were under the “control” of the Bangladeshi migrants, said many respondents. Most offers came to them because Nepalese, Indians and Pakistanis were reluctant to accept them. Nowadays the work offers are often diverted to Mainland Chinese competitors. After the handover in 1997, entry to Hong Kong for the Mainland Chinese became easier, said respondents. They had an advantage over the Bangladeshis in getting manual work because of their proficiency in Cantonese. When Hong Kongers approached with a work offer, the mainlanders rushed to them, so they turned the Bangladeshis down. Thus the mainlanders grabbed their work offers.

A Hong Kong ID card is vital for getting a telephone connection and renting a rented. More than 90 per cent of the respondents were not eligible to obtain an ID card due to their lack of legal status in Hong Kong. In these circumstances, they adopt interesting strategies. Living with a girlfriend (outside marriage) is not sanctioned in Bangladesh society, either socially or religiously, although recently this traditional convention has weakened in urban areas among people on upper rung of the social hierarchy. In Hong Kong, however, irrespective of status, Bangladeshi men could often have girlfriends. Almost all the respondents admitted either directly or indirectly to having girlfriends, no matter whether they were married or unmarried. These friends helped migrants in a number of ways such as producing their cards on behalf of their boyfriends to rent their houses. Some of them opened bank accounts with the help of their girlfriends. Interestingly, about two-thirds of them had multiple girlfriends, who were mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia. Without any exception, the Bangladeshi migrants working in Hong Kong had moved there primarily for economic reasons and to find manual work. The income was higher in Hong Kong than in other East and Southeast Asian countries. Respondents admitted that they had easier access to Hong Kong. Many of them were waiting to sneak into Europe through Hong Kong and this was one of their explanations for why they stayed there. A few others said that they had nothing to do in their home country, hence it was better being in Hong Kong. They also felt at home because many of their friends and relatives were here and at the same time they could communicate with their families easily.

A key theme is that they are faced with adaptation difficulties. Their mental health is deeply affected by these difficulties, culminating in intense stress. The author sees eight specific factors as causing or exacerbating the level of stress in migrants. These factors are: loss and grief, social

isolation, status inconsistency, traumatic experiences, culture shock, acculturation stress, accelerated modernization, and minority status (Ghorashi, 2005). Park introduced two key ideas in migration scholarship: the melting pot metaphor and the concept of marginal men. Park (1928) believed that every society was to some degree a successful melting pot, where diverse populations merge, acculturate, and eventually assimilate, albeit at varied rates and in different ways (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2006). However, high heterogeneity in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, culture, colour, caste and so on between Bangladesh and Hong Kong societies tend to refute the melting pot metaphor. One might define successful integration as the situation where an ethnic group that is observationally equivalent to native-born citizens is also observationally equivalent in socio-economic outcomes (employment rate, earnings, job quality). A useful tool to study this is the Dip and Catch-up model i.e. immigrants enter at a disadvantage relative to comparable natives because they lack host country specific skills, but they will catch up because of their strong incentives to invest in these skills (Zorhu and Joop, 2008). Though the Dip and Catch-up model has been developed and applied mostly in the United States, and almost exclusively focused on earnings (Chiswick, 1978, Borjas, 1985, 1995; Friedberg, 2000), it could explain the adaptation pattern of MWs in Asia. As ethnic groups become more culturally and economically adaptive, group members tend to move away physically from the ethnic zones into more ethnically diverse areas (Massey, 1985) which further reinforces cultural integration and increases economic benefit (Allen and Turner, 1996) and eventually this group is more likely to accept a host country culture (Myles and Feng, 2003). From a sociological perspective, these points are significant and most social scientists agree that people are part of a wider network on which they depend. The social network to which an individual belongs has affects people strongly in terms of the shared norms, cultural and religious beliefs. Research into forced migration (Zmegac, 2005; Ghorashi, 2005) evidenced the importance afforded to the study of exile in sociological inquiry. The mostly social causes of migrants' stress lead to several socio-psychological implications that generate emotional and behavioural problems of which the most serious are depression and anxiety, somatic preoccupation and complaints, material conflicts, intergenerational conflicts, substance misuse and sociopathic behaviour. If this is the case, then a view could be that the best remedy of the psychological and social disruption in migrants should be sought and found in the reconstruction of the social environment that is the normal and natural place for social actors.

CONCLUSIONS

Although much disagreement exists on how quickly migrants catch up with native-born workers and whether they eventually reach parity at all, researchers generally agree on the overall pattern of faster earnings growth and hence diminishing disadvantage for migrants. Migration dynamics from Bangladesh to Hong Kong have changed over time with the major policy changes that took place in late 2006. However, the author's other research after the policy changes confirms that the influx to Hong Kong has not come to an end, because the potential migrants found a new route through PR China to get to Hong Kong, meaning that they continued to explore new strategies of effectively getting into a city where vigorous government surveillance on the illegal MWs has always been in force. This case is interesting in a number of ways, for example, most of them stay put in Hong Kong legally and work illegally. More interestingly, they entered with a stay permit of two weeks and kept extending their stay to an average of eight years. Every two weeks they had to play strategies and then "new strategies" to keep their passport and visa in order. Obtaining work was not as easy as before (1997) because the new influx of the Mainlanders landed to add to the already high number of "illegal" workers, and Nepalese and Pakistanis started accepting jobs they did not accept before. Their stay was facilitated by their girlfriends. Most of them had multiple girl-

friends. Having multiple girlfriends was one of their strategies for getting different purposes served. For example, one girl friend's ID card was used to open a bank account and another's for getting a telephone connected. They developed their own languages to communicate with their compatriots and the law enforcing agencies. While Achat et al. (1998), Bhagat (1999), Caliguri (2000), and Harr (2007) more or less underlined that migrants take on adaptation processes in the new environment and adaptations are facilitated by the social networks, the whole gamut of findings of this study reinforce the idea that migrants, whether documented or undocumented, count on destination-specific adaptation strategies. This study has presented the idiosyncratic dynamics of strategies the Bangladeshi migrant workers espouse in Hong Kong. While this research does not claim to have explored all the issues of adaptation strategies that the BMWs in Hong Kong adopt, it has added new scholarship to the literature of migration from Bangladesh to East Asian region. Further research would explore how this population group are adapting to the challenges that emerged after immigration policy changes in 2006.

NOTES

1. In Bangladesh with its high unemployment rates, migration is seen as a good investment, since the government depends heavily on remittances for its annual budget. Bangladesh received US\$3177.63 million in 2003 and US\$3573.76 million in 2004 as remittance. In the first two months of 2005 it was US\$646.23 million (BMET, 2005).
2. <http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2008/3-International-migration.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2009).
3. The difference between in and out migration is net migrant and the gross migration is the sum of in and out migration.
4. A prestigious brand name watch (such as Tudor or Rolex) is very expensive as it is a status symbol in Hong Kong. A fake watch is hard to distinguish from the real one but the price is less than half that of the real one. Hence the agents need to convince the potential customer to buy a fake one.

REFERENCES

- Achat, H. I. Kawachi, S. Levine, et al.
1998 "Social networks, stress and health-related quality of life", *Quality of Life Research*, 7:735–750.
- Adda, J., C. Dustmann and J. Mestres
2006 *A Dynamic Model of Return Migration*, Preliminary Version. University College London and IFS. UK.
- APMRN (Asia Pacific Migration Research Network)
2005 *Migration Issue in the Asia Pacific*, Issue paper from Hong Kong. UNESCO.
- Appleyard, R.
1989 "International migration and developing countries", in R. Appleyard (Ed.). *The impact of international migration on developing countries*. OECD. France.
- AMC (Asian Migration Centre)
2005 *Info Bank*, Asian Migration Centre, Hong Kong
- Athukorala, P-C, and C. Manning
1999 *Structural change and international migration in East Asia: adjusting to labour scarcity*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bangladesh Bank
2009 *Country-wise inward remittance from wage earners abroad*, Central Bank. Dhaka.
- BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)
2008 *Statistical Pocketbook*, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Dhaka.

- Berry, J. W.
1986 "The acculturation process and refugee behaviour" in C. L. Williams and J. Westermeyer (Eds) *Refugee mental health in resettlement countries*, Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, Washington: 25–38.
- Bhagat, R.S.
1999 "Getting started and getting ahead: Career dynamics of immigrants", *Human Resource Management Review*, 9(3):349–368.
- Bleakley, H. and A. Chin
2007 *English Proficiency and Social Assimilation Among Immigrants: An Instrumental-Variables Approach*, Working Paper 149. University of Chicago.
- BMET (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training)
2005 *Report on Migration Flow from and Remittance Flow in Bangladesh*, The Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka.
- Borjas, G.
1995 "Assimilation and Changes in Cohort Quality Revisited: What happened to Immigrant Earnings in the 1980s?" *Journal of Labor Economics*, 13: 201–245.
- Caligiuri, P.M.
2000 "Selecting expatriates for personality characteristics: A moderating effect of personality on the relationship between host national contract and cross cultural adjustment", *Management International Review*, 40(1):61–80.
- Castles, S.
2003 "Migrant settlement, transnational communities and state strategies in the Asian Pacific region", In R. Iredale, C. Hawksley and S. Castles (Eds), *Migration in the Asia Pacific: population, settlement and citizenship issues*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Castles, S. and J. Millar Mark
2003 *The age of migration*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York.
- Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong
2008 *Hong Kong 2007 Population Census*, Statistics Department. Hong Kong.
- Chan, S. C.
1998 "Politicizing Tradition: The Identity of Indigenous Inhabitants in Hong Kong", *Ethnology*, 37(1):39–54.
- Chan, E.
2002 "Beyond Pedagogy: Language and Identity in Post-Colonial Hong Kong", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23 (2): 271–285.
- Chantavanich, S. and G. Risser
2000 "Intra-regional migration in Southeast and East Asia: theoretical overview, trends of migratory flows, and implications for Thailand and Thai migrants workers", In S. Chantavanich, A. Germershausen and A. Beesey (Eds). *Thai migrant workers in East and Southeast Asia 1996–1997*. Asian Research Centre for Migration. Institute of Asian Studies. Chulalongkorn University. ARCM No. 019. Bangkok.
- Chin, C.B. N.
2002 "The host state and the guest worker in Malaysia: public management of migrant labourer in times of economic prospects and crisis", *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 8(4):19–40.
- Chiu, S. W. K.
2001 "Recent economic and labour migration-related developments in Hong Kong (China)", In OECD (2001). *International migration in Asia: trends and policies*. OECD. France.
- Chiswick, B.
1978 "The effect of Americanization on the Earnings of Foreign-Born Men", *Journal of Political Economy*, 86: 897–921.
- Clark, K. and J. Lindley
2006 "Immigrant Labour Market Assimilation and Arrival Effects: Evidence from the UK Labour Force Survey", Discussion Paper No. 2228. IZA. Bonn, Germany.
- Coleman, D.
1988 "Social Capital in the Creation of Human capital", *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, supplement: 95–120.

- Conzen, K.N.
1990 "Making their Own America Assimilation Theory and the German Peasant Pioneer", German Historical Institute Washington, D.C. Annual Lecture Series No. 3.
- Cuellar, I., et al.
1997 "Ethnic Identity and Acculturation in a Young Adult Mexican-origin", *Population. Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(6), 535–549.
- Ellis, M. and R. Wright
2005 "Assimilation and differences between the settlement patterns of individual immigrants and immigrant households", *PNAS* 102: 43:15325–15330.
- Findlay, A. M. and F. L. N. Li
1998 "A Migration Channels Approach to the Study of Professionals Moving to and from Hong Kong", *International Migration Review*, 32(3): 682–703.
- Friedberg, R.
2000 "You can't take it with you? Immigrant assimilation and the portability of human capital", *Journal of Labor Economics*, 18(2): 221–251.
- Friedman, J. and S. Randeria (Eds)
2004 *Worlds on: Globalization, Migration and Cultural Security*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Ghaffar-Kucher, A.
2006 "Assimilation, Integration, or Isolation? (Re)Framing the Education of Immigrants. Current Issues", *Comparative Education*, 9(1).
- Ghorashi, H.
2005 "Agents of Change or Passive Victims: The Impact of Welfare States (the Case of the Netherlands) on Refugees", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18: 181–198.
- Gordon, M. M.
1964 *Assimilation in American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harr C.
2007 "Migrant Family Adaptation and Quality of Life: A Qualitative Study in Brazil," in R.J. Estes (Ed.), *Advancing Quality of Life in a Turbulent World*, Springer: 209–220.
- Hasan M.
2000 "Complementarity between international migration and trade: a case study of Bangladesh", *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, AIDS, USA. 1(1):38–51.
- Hewison K.
2003 "A preliminary analysis of Thai workers in Hong Kong: survey results", Southeast Asian Research Centre and CAPSTRANS; City University of Hong Kong. Working paper no 44. Hong Kong.
- Hewison K.
2004 "Thai migrant workers in Hong Kong", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 34(3):318–335.
- Ho L, L. Pak-wai and L. Kit-chun
1991 *International Labour Migration: The Case of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies. The Chinese University of Hong Kong: Hong Kong, occasional paper no. 8.
- Hum D. and W. Simpson
2005 *Economic Assimilation of Canadian Immigrants: Cross sectional vs. Panel Data Estimates*, Final Research Report. University of Manitoba. Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration
- Inqilab Daily
2004 "Immigration department turned to business centre: anything can be done one wishes by bribes", Dhaka.
- IOM (International Organization for Migration)
2008 "World migration report", Geneva: IOM.
- Johnston R., M. Poulsen and J. Forrest
2006 "Ethnic Residential Segregation and Assimilation in British Towns and Cities: a Comparison of those claiming Single and Dual Ethnic Identities", *Migration Letters*, 3(1):1–30.
- Khalaf Sulayman and Alkobaisi Saad
1999 "Migrants" strategies of coping and patterns of accommodation in the oil-rich Gulf societies: evidence from the UAE", *British journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 26(2): 271–298.

- Kim, Y.Y.
1978 "A communication approach to the acculturation process: A study of Korean immigrants in Chicago", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2(2):197–224.
- Kovacev L. and R. Shute
2004 "Acculturation and social support in relation to psychosocial adjustment of adolescent refugees resettled in Australia", *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 28(3): 259–267.
- Lal, B
1997 "Ethnic Identity Entrepreneurs: Their Role in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions", *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 6(3-4): 385–413.
- Lazear, E. P
1999 "Culture and Language", *Journal of Political Economy*, 107: S95–S126.
- Levine, R. A
2004 "Assimilating Immigrants: Why America Can and France Cannot", OP-132-RC. The RAND Corporation. VA.
- Li, F.L.N, A.M. Findlay and H. Jones
1998 "A cultural economy perspective on service sector migration in the global city: the case of Hong Kong", *International Migration*; 36(2).
- Logan, J.R., R.D. Alba, and W.Q. Zhang
2002 "Immigrant enclaves and ethnic communities in New York and Los Angeles", *American Sociological Review*, 67 (2): 299–322.
- Massey, D.S., J Arango and G. Hugo
1996 "Theories of international migration: a review and appraisal", in R. Cohen (Ed.) *Theories of Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, London.
- Myles, J. and F. Hou
2003 "Changing Colours: Spatial Assimilation Theory and New Racial Minority Immigrants", University of Toronto and Statistics Canada.
- Nayeem, S.
2008 *Bangladeshi Diaspora in Peninsular Malaysia: Organizational Structure, Survival Strategies and Networks*, PhD Dissertation, University of Bonn. Germany.
- Oishi, N.
2002 "Gender and migration: an integrative approach". The Centre for Comparative Immigration Studies, Working paper no. 49. USA.
- Palo D. de, R. Faini, A. Venturini
2007 "The social assimilation of immigrants", SP discussion paper No. 0701. The World Bank.
- Park, R. E.
1928 "Human migration and the marginal man", *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6): 881–893.
- Pedraza, S.
2005 "Assimilation or transnationalism? conceptual models of the immigrant experience in America", In Ram Mahalingam, ed., *Cultural Psychology of Immigrants*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Jackson, P. and J. Penrose
1993 "Conclusion: identity and the politics of difference", in P. Jackson and J. Penrose (Eds), *Constructions of race, place and nation*, UCL Press, London 202–209.
- Pew Hispanic Center
2004 "Assimilation and Language", 1919 M Street, NW, Suite 460, Washington, DC www.pewhispanic.org.
- Plüss, C.
2005 "Constructing Globalized Ethnicity: Migrants from India in Hong Kong", *International Sociology*, 20(2): 201–224.
- Raghubir, P. and G. Venkataramani Johar
1999 "Hong Kong 1997 in Context", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 63(4):543–565.
- Richard, A. and V. Nee
1997 "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration", *International Migration Review*, 31(4): 826–874.

- Rudnick, A.
1995 "Bangladeshi workers in the textile industry in Penang: people or commodities?", *Global Media Newsletter*. Amsterdam.
- Scott, G. M. Jr.
1990 "A re-synthesis of the primordial and circumstantial approaches to ethnic group solidarity: Towards an explanatory model", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13:147–171.
- Simon Fan, C. and Oded Stark
2007 "A Social Proximity Explanation of the Reluctance to Assimilate", *KYKLOS*, 60(1): 55–63.
- Skeldon, R.
2000 "Trends in international migration in the Asian and Pacific region", *International Social Science Journal*, 52(165): 369–382.
- Sparks, D. W. and G. E. Guldin
1978 "On Ethnicity in Hong Kong", *Current Anthropology*, 19(1): 218–219.
- Sparks, D. W.
1977 "Ethnicity in Urban Hong Kong", *Current Anthropology*, 18(2): 356–357.
- Stahl, W. C.
2003 "International labour migration in East Asia: trends and policy issues", In R. Iredale, C. Hawksley and S. Castles (Eds), *Migration in the Asia Pacific: population, settlement and citizenship issues*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Stouffer, S.
1940 "Intervening opportunities: a theory relating mobility and distance", *American Sociological Review*, 5:845–867.
- Ullah, A. A.
2008 "The price of migration from Bangladesh to distant lands: narratives of recent tragedies", *Asian Profile*, 36(6).
- Ullah, A.A.
2009 "Theoretical rhetoric about migration networks. Bangladeshi labour migrant in Malaysia", *International Migration*, in press
- van den Berghe, P. L.
1978 "Race and ethnicity: a socio- biological perspective", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1: 401–411.
- Waddington, C.
2003 *Livelihood outcomes of migration for poor people*, Working paper T1, Sussex Centre for Migration Research. Development Research Centre: migration, globalization and poverty. Sussex.
- World Bank
2008 "International Migration, Remittance and Poverty in Developing Countries", Poverty Reduction Group MSN MC4-41. Washington, D.C. 20433.
- Zeng, Z.
2004 "The Economic Assimilation of Asian Immigrants: A Longitudinal Study", Department of Sociology. University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Zorhu, A. and J. Hartog
2008 "Employment assimilation of immigrants in the Netherlands: catching up and the irrelevance of education", The Tinbergen Institute is the institute for economic research of the Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Amsterdam.
- Zmegac, J. C.
2005 "Ethnically Privileged Migrants in Their New Homeland", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18(2):199–215.