

# Theoretical Rhetoric About Migration Networks: A Case of a Journey of Bangladeshi Workers to Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the routes that Bangladeshi migrant workers take to get to Malaysia. This paper also tests the basic tenets and the applicability of networks theory with the empirical reality on the routes. In order to test it, the route negotiated by Bangladeshi migrant workers from Bangladesh to Malaysia is considered. Network theory proposes that migration, in terms of reduction of costs and mitigation of risks, is facilitated by networks.

Data demonstrate that majority of the respondents had incurred exorbitant costs on their migration. To get to their destination, half of the respondents took around a month, a quarter of them took between one and two months, while a person traveling in a normal way could make the same air journey safely in three hours. En route they suffered many other severe adversities: such as starvation, maltreatment, and were forced to pass through deep jungles. Thus, this study directly challenges the theory by illustrating that despite their access to networks, their migration was marked by a lengthy, painful, and hazardous journey.

## BACKGROUND

The pattern of population migration fundamentally has changed in the twenty-first century, raising hopes for many and adding to the frustrations and agonies of many others (Rahman, 2004; Haque, 2004:7). Moreover, contemporary migration has added another intriguing factor to migration literature that it made some countries not only an origin point, but a transit area, or destination of migrants or all three (McKinley, 2005:6; Ahmed, 1998: 370; Kusago, 1998: 485; International Organization for Migration-International Organization for Migration, 2004: 37). Along with demand-supply functions and push-pull forces of classical theory, many other factors have contributed to the changing pattern of migration. The desperate desire of the potential migrants to set off for overseas often without knowing where they are going to end up has nowadays surfaced as a significant factor. While the demand for foreign

labour continues to expand, migration flows have become increasingly diverse and complex (International Labour Organization, 2003:4). This has further caused a proliferation in fraudulent brokers and agency syndicates who often determine what sort of networks to use for migrants. Exogenous to the migrant, loose governmental concern, widespread corruption are held responsible for causing aspiring migrants to take illegal and often more costly routes of migration.

In low income countries in Asia, widespread unemployment, people's naiveté or sheer risk-taking, and their desperate desire to leave for overseas make potential migrants easy victims for the agents who often operate without a legal base. Along with registered agents, many other brokers and unregistered agents emerged to take advantage of the contemporary migration flow. Generally labour migration takes place in poorer households so as to diversify their income. According to the Bangladeshi daily *The Prothom Alo*, it is easier for agents to attract poor rural folks with promises of lucrative jobs and higher income probabilities (28 March 2005; 8 July 2005). According to many respondents, the brokers use all enticing imageries of a better life, to induce potential migrants to decide on moving overseas. Normally, the motive of these brokers is to make quick money from the transport process as the transport of people through borders comes with little or no resistance (International Organization for Migration, 2004: 31). Bangladesh, a labour surplus country, with apparently all its push forces in full swing, fails to send all its potential and aspiring migrants through legal/regular means. Therefore, migrants look for an alternative and easier way to migrate, a vacuum which illegal networks fill.

Officially, every year an average of 225,000 Bangladeshis set off for overseas countries,<sup>1</sup> mostly to the Middle Eastern countries (see Rahman, 2003). Since the mid-1980s, due to the subsequent Gulf Wars and declining salary base, disillusionment with countries in the Middle East have caused the migration stream to partially redirect to Southeast and East Asian countries (BMET, 2005). Malaysia, with its booming economy, faced severe labour shortages in every sector. As economic activities increased towards the end of 1999, the demand for foreign workers further escalated. In the wake of the severe labour shortage (Hugo, 1998: 3; Chan and Abdullah, 1999: 15), the government came into an agreement with Bangladesh, along with other countries, to import labour to Malaysia. Bangladesh started exporting skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled labourers to Malaysia through registered recruiting agencies.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the number of foreign workers rose from 750,000 in 1999 to over 900,000 in 2000 (Kassim, 2001: 234). However, within four years of the signing the agreement on labour export from Bangladesh, Malaysia terminated it. However, the flows of migration have not diminished, rather it continued in different forms and scales. In some cases, Bangladeshi workers who moved to Malaysia with contracts of three to five years, with possible renewal depending on the performances and policies, went back to Bangladesh after their contracts expired, while many others remained in Malaysia. Many people, often unknowingly, entered Malaysia through illegal routes facilitated by brokers and traffickers.

While some definitions include situations where the trafficked persons are still in their home community, the term trafficking is most often used to apply to persons who have moved or are forced to move from their homes. With the significant rise in migration, there has been a worldwide exponential growth in irregular migration over the years. Therefore, the estimated irregular migrants account for 30–40 per cent of the 5 million migrants in Asia (see Wickramasekera, 2002: 16–21). In many cases, they find themselves in abusive and exploitative situations when they move with little or no information (see Siddiqui, 2004: 22). A huge number of aspiring Bangladeshi migrants- semi-skilled and unskilled- fall into the agents' traps, spending their last resources, emptying all their savings, to finance their migration.

## METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

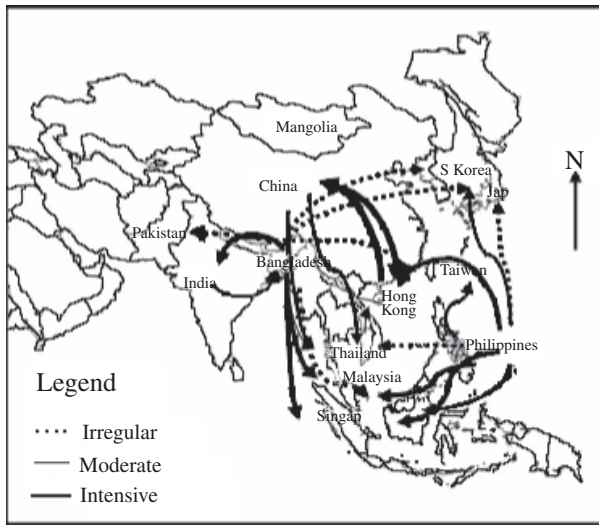
This study is primarily based on first hand empirical data collected through questionnaire survey, ethnography and observation. However, secondary sources are also used to corroborate primary data. Basic data on Bangladesh migration flow has been garnered from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)<sup>3</sup> in Bangladesh. From May to June 2005, both closed and open-ended questionnaire surveys, and some in-depth case studies were administered to 70 migrant workers from different places in Malaysia, both from Kuala Lumpur, and from outlying areas where migrants moved after crackdowns on illegal workers, such as Ampang, Johor Bahru, Shah Alam, Seri Serdang, Seri Kembangan, Kajang, Klang, and Putra Jaya. Most of the respondents worked in construction sites and in coconut and palm gardens, while a few others in paper mills and shoe factories. These places were selected by the help of the snow-ball technique. However, a systematic statistical equation with proper precision level ( $\pm 5$ ) has been employed to determine the sample size and then the respondents were selected randomly. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyse data. In order to substantiate quantitative information, qualitative aspects were also taken into account. The paper explores the routes the migrants traveled, the length of time required to get to their destinations and the magnitude of the adversities they suffered. The paper considers the main theoretical propositions of network theory, namely that networks reduce the cost and risk of migration.

## MIGRATION AND REGIONAL INTENSITY

With the emergence of diverse forms of migration in the contemporary world, human smuggling or trafficking<sup>4</sup> has mostly been related to commercial sexual exploitation, which continues to be a significant problem throughout East Asia and the Pacific (International Organization for Migration, 2004: 31). The flow of trafficked victims throughout the South and Southeast Asian region is complex because there is not just one phenomenon at work in this region: there are different causal factors, different locations, and different levels of involvement by organized syndicates. There continues to be major demand-side factors across the region – burgeoning commercial sexual exploitation in destination countries provides ample incentive to traffickers to meet demand (see Hamilton, 2002). Major source countries of illegal or semi-compliant workers in Malaysia are Indonesia (85.5%); Myanmar (4.7%); Thailand (3.2%); India (2.3%); Bangladesh (1.6%); and Pakistan (1.2%) (See Kassim, 2001:237; Ullah, 2005a, 2005c).

It is of particular importance to observe the trend of migration in the South-east Asian region because they influence each other in the proliferation of migration. Thailand is a major regional hub for irregular migration and trafficking; it is an origin, destination, transit and facilitation centre all at once (Chantavanich, Germershausen and Beesey, 2000: 18). Thailand receives trafficked victims from all neighbouring countries, as well as from Central Asia and Russia. While it is not a labour importing country, the number of illegal workers arrested was as high of 444,636 in 2000. No information is available on how many Bangladeshis have migrated and stayed on illegally. The number of immigrants was recorded as 663,776 persons in 2000 (Chalamwong, 2001: 292). Because the process for attaining a tourist visa is easier in Thailand than elsewhere, traffickers choose this land for transporting migrants on to other countries. Cheaper hotel and meal costs contribute to choosing Thailand as a transit country than neighbouring Singapore. Singapore, meanwhile, is a destination country for young men and women from many countries like Malaysia, China, Thailand, the Philippines and countries in South Asia. It is also a transit country between

MAP 1  
MAP OF ASIA SHOWING THE MIGRATION



Source: Adopted from Ullah, 2005.

Bangladesh and Malaysia. A part of Indonesia's trafficking is for domestic and industrial labour, in addition to the commercial sexual exploitation that draws young people to the dynamic economic centres within the archipelago. Indonesia is also a source country for young women and girls who are trafficked out to many countries for commercial sexual exploitation.

This section outlines the major trafficking hubs in Southeast Asia with a view to identifying major trafficking routes. Southeast Asia alone produces three times as many victims of trafficking than the entire history of slavery from Africa. Trafficking is a phenomenon predominantly feminized. Malaysia, like Thailand, with a large commercial "sex sector" combined with a developing economy demanding cheap and abundant labour (Yoshimi, 2001) is a destination country for trafficked men, women and girls from Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, South Asia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, China and Bangladesh. Malaysian labour force includes 10 to 20 per cent foreign workers, with the uncertainty due in part to the large number of illegal workers; there are a million legal foreign workers and perhaps another million unauthorized foreigners (Migration News, April 2005). Cambodia is a destination country for women and children who are trafficked from Vietnam and China for sexual exploitation. Common destinations for trafficking victims are Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Sihanouk Ville. Women and children are trafficked for sexual and labour exploitation in Thailand, Malaysia, Macao, and Taiwan. Cambodia is a transit country as well for trafficked victims from Vietnam to Thailand. Lao PDR is primarily a source but also a transit and destination country for human trafficking. Laotian women and children are trafficked for sexual and labour exploitation in Thailand. Laos is a transit country for victims trafficked from Burma and Vietnam to Thailand. Burmese men, women, and children are trafficked for sexual and labour exploitation in Thailand, the People's Republic of China, Malaysia, Bangladesh, South Korea, Macau, and Pakistan. Burma is a transit country for victims trafficked from China to Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore (US Department of State, 2007).

## NETWORKS: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Networks have long occupied a significant space in the migration process. The network is an intermediary between the micro-level of individual decision-making and the macro-level of structural determinants (Faist, 2000). It contributes largely to the individual's decision to move, supposedly because the network reduces the cost and the risk of migration. Networks carry additional significance particularly because of the presence of relatives in the places of origin and destination who support the migrant in leaving the one and settling in the other. The links between people, places and mediating structures become active through social networks (Lindquist, 1999: 76-8). Here I divide the networks regime into two: interpersonal and recruiting networks. Because of the fact that the study respondents did not count on interpersonal networks for their migration, arguments of this paper advance with the recruiting networks.

Massey (1988: 396) defines migration networks as "sets of interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin." Interpersonal networks are made up of ties that link migrants with relatives, neighbours and friends abroad or returned. Recruiting networks comprise agents, brokers, and those paid for their services in facilitating migration. Often called 'professional' networks, these actors receive money for their services and may operate legally or illegally. They provide transport, labour contracts, housing, legal, extralegal, and other services to facilitate international migration (see Massey, Arango and Hugo, 1996; Waldinger, 1997: 5; Lindquist, 1999: 76-9; Faist, 2000: 1). However, interpersonal networks are not complete alternatives to the recruiting networks. They may provide financial assistance, information or accommodation after arrival but not other services, such as getting contracts and paperwork done.

Institutions such as private and voluntary organizations developed to support and sustain migrants and act as mediators. They now include a variety of legal and illegal entities that provide transport, labour contracting, housing, legal and other services that constitute a form of social capital in the process of international migration (Massey et al., 1996; Waldinger, 1997: 5). Clearly that in general, networks, either institutional or non-institutional, facilitate migration.

In this study, the majority of the undocumented migrant workers got to Malaysia through either Thailand or Singapore with the help of broker syndicates at respective transit points. Shown in the following figure (Figure 1) are some stages of networks used in this particular case. There are local level networks maintained by the local brokers, and recruiting agents who operate at the district and division levels, and then an international network maintained by different syndicates. The basic information about work contract and income probability in the destination country is normally disseminated by the relatives already or previously abroad.

The following section demonstrates that the normal routes have been redirected to clandestine and risky routes by the help of the brokers and agent syndicates; that is, the very networks that ought to reduce the cost and risk for migrants are in fact increasing cost and risk. Before describing the routes and transit points, it is essential to differentiate between illegal migration and actual trafficking. The concept of risk needs to be explicated here. The term risk is highly contested. There has been a considerable amount of empirical research undertaken on the way people perceive risk, how they manage it and how they live with it. Different types of risk generate different reactions. Voluntary activities are not seen as risky as involuntary activities and new risks are regarded differently from familiar hazards (Botteril and Nicole, 2004). Bernstein argues, "...risk touches on the most profound aspects of psychology, mathematics, statistics and history" (Bernstein, 1996). It refers to a combination of

the probability, or frequency, of occurrence of a defined hazard and the magnitude of the consequences of the occurrence (Harding, 1998: 167). It is the possible loss of something of value" which disregards the possibility that risky behaviour can have an upside (Friedman, 1987:67). Douglas points out that "risk is the probability of an event combined with the magnitude of the losses and gains that it entails (1992: 40). Perceptions of risk do not appear to correlate with measurable probabilities of risk and therefore other factors are clearly important in understanding how people understand risk.

In response to the question of why they relied on brokers for their migration, a number of answers came out. One significant issue has been the distinction in how a legal and illegal recruiting agency operates. While illegal recruiting agencies collect potential migrants from their doorstep across the country, legal recruiting (registered recruiting agencies mostly are Dhaka city based) expect clients to go to them. They are motivated with lucrative job offers overseas. Lack of updated information is an advantage to the illegal agencies or brokers. More and more migrants are generated due to the economic and political instability in the country which means the number of potential migrants is on the rise. Combined with the failure of creating new labour markets, the government recruiting agencies in the past years lost their credibility to the migrants within the country and among the recruiters abroad. Therefore, these brokers and illegal agencies are the only better alternatives left to them for their easy and quick migration.

The figure neatly demonstrates that the recruiting networks in Bangladesh play a major role of networks ranging from information dissemination to the potential migrants on opportunities at destinations to formal processing regarding overall migration. However, the role of recruiting agencies might be dissimilar in other context or in other countries. Borne out by my empirical reality that recruiting agents are playing networks, this issue has gained strong theoretical ground. Migration is defined as a network-creating process because it develops an increasingly dense web of contacts between places of origin and destination (Spittel, 1998). Networks provide the mechanisms for connecting an initial, highly selective group of potential immigrants with a gradually growing base of followers back home. Networks offer rapid transmission of information about openings. And networks provide better information within workplaces, reducing the risks associated with initial hiring, and similarly connecting co-ethnic entrepreneurs, who take membership in the community as an index of trust (Waldinger, 1997).

Movement of one person within a network transforms the relationship into a valuable connection that can be used by anybody within the network to facilitate migration. This kind of networks facilitates migration to the connected ones only. These days networks do not only refer to brother-brother or father-son networks. This goes beyond that. Therefore, an inestimable number of recruiting agencies (legal and illegal) have recently emerged in Bangladesh to facilitate migration to the potential migrants. Faist (2000) draws upon two issues in networks: sustained ties of persons, networks (informal) and organizations across the borders (formal), ranging from weakly to strongly institutionalized forms (Faist, 2000). Waldinger (2006) further considers it as a shortcoming when network theories obscure the role of recruiting agencies played as networks. However, quality and quantity vary over sources of support from social and interpersonal networks, and recruiting networks. Spittel (1998) and Faist (2000) attach enormous emphasis on the issue of reciprocity in the networks. Recruiting agencies, or what I call institutional or formal networks, provide services on a reciprocal basis as well.

Tyner (2004:15) and Hugo (1997) observe that existing studies failed to adequately address the role of recruiters and other informal and formal institutional elements which facilitate and initiate migration. They, along with Lindquist (1999), agree that the recruitment agencies play role of complex networks of migration. Therefore, I would agree with the arguments

Vertovec (2002) made that social networks facilitate finding jobs and accommodation, circulating goods and services, as well as psychological support and continuous social and economic information.

## LEGAL ISSUES AND VULNERABILITY CORRELATES

Legal status determines the level of vulnerability of migrants in the host countries. It must be emphasized that legal status causes, and is caused by, the particular way migrants get to their destinations. While the routes already described depict the legal status of migrants, a little further analysis on the issues is required. Data show that during the reference period (May – June 2005) around 36 per cent of the migrants claimed that they held tourist visas, 33 per cent had no visas, 9 per cent had neither visa or passport, and 7 per cent had student permits. Except for the student visa holders (who were working but held student permit), the permits of other migrants have expired already. However, the mean length of their stint in Malaysia is 8.93 years.<sup>5</sup> During the entry period all of them held Thai tourist visas. None had Malaysian visas of any category.

Ruhs and Anderson (2006) propose, though in the UK perspective, three concepts to distinguish three levels of compliance of the immigrants/migrants: “compliance”, “semi-compliance” and “non-compliance” to denote three different types of situations pertaining to a migrant’s immigration status. Compliant migrants are legally resident and working exclusively under and in full compliance with the conditions attached to their immigration status. Non-compliant migrants are those without the right to reside in the host country. Semi-compliance indicates a situation where a migrant has the right to residence but is working in violation of some or all of the conditions attached to the migrant’s immigration status.

A question<sup>6</sup> may generally be raised – how did others manage to get to Malaysia with legal documents? This has been answered in another work (see Ullah, 2005): there is a correlation between the level of education, place of residence, and “legal” migration. This has been further explained by the fact that the urban population has better access to information and is more exposed to the outside world, so that their chances of entering a deceptive transaction are often low. Though the opportunity to migrate is limited for the poorest, due in part to the need for capital to finance migration or lack of required skill (Carling, 2005: 2), the long queue of applicants for overseas employment and the proliferation of recruitment agencies in Bangladesh manifest the growing interest in migration (Rahman, 2005: 2). Therefore, labour migration generally takes place in relatively poor households (Ullah, 2005b; Karim, 2006: 3); and it is no wonder that their access to sufficient financial resources, marketable skills, and information is also limited (see Carling, 2005: 2). Therefore, many researchers argue that migration has been seen as a livelihood strategy. Whenever people could no longer secure a livelihood, they migrated elsewhere. Today, however, both poor and better off people pursue migration as a livelihood strategy in Bangladesh. Choice of destination and levels of benefits and risks, however, vary significantly, according to the economic and social power of the migrant (Siddiqui, 2003). International migration takes place so as to improve the livelihoods of the migrants and their families, argues Oishi Nana. It can be of long-term or short-term duration and may even be seasonal in nature. Household strategy theorists contend that migration decisions are made by households rather than by an individual. According to the proponents of this approach, people act collectively not only to maximize expected income but also to minimize risks for the members of the kinship unit (Oishi, 2002).

This section explores the different types of permits held by the respondents. Malaysia has strong policies against illegal workers and those who employ them. Both employers

and workers were well aware of these policies. Perhaps the most dominant factor that makes a migrant worker vulnerable is their illegal status. According to many respondents, employers facilitated their stay in order to benefit from their illegal status which allows them to offer lower wages than the due. However, some migrants who entered legally with work permits slipped into illegal one at a later stage in the following fashion: when they noticed that their wage rate was lower than agreed upon earlier with the brokers, they protested and sought justice; consequently the employer, who was holding their passports, chased them away and eventually they became irregular or what Ruhs and Anderson (2006) call semi-compliant because of the fact that they did not possess legal documents.

The following sections discuss the troubled routes they traveled; hardship of varied forms they suffered; unexpectedly longer journey time they took; and food arrangement on clandestine journey to argue that networks do not always play a facilitating role in migration.

### THE ROUTES AND TRANSIT POINTS

Migration route is a significant part of the migration process. In order to map these migration routes, it is important to know some characteristics about countries that receive and offer transits and their way of moving. Migrants travel a great part of their trip from their home country to the point of departure to Malaysia inevitably with the help of recruiting networks to complete their journey. Migrants travel from place to place, and decide on the spot about the city or country that would be their next destination. This decision depends on which option is the best or easiest way for them to continue their trip, and in many cases which decision is made really depends on the moment. The route map of migrant in this case is very complicated as shown in the Table. The routes taken to get to their destinations outlined here test in a way the tenets of migration networks that whether they reduce cost or/and risk of migration. In some ways, the definition depends upon the outcome. That is, if the process goes well, it is migration; if it does not, it is trafficking.<sup>7</sup> Also, the trafficking paradigm does not only relate to women and kids, but they are the ones most commonly covered in research projects and programmes, etc. While many women and children are trafficked into exploitative circumstances, there are also men who go abroad and suffer a similar destiny which, however, is not called trafficking (IOM, 2004: 13). This issue resonates throughout the findings of the current study.

**Routes:** This study has discovered six routes the migrants traveled to get to Malaysia. The majority of the migrant workers got to Malaysia traversing Thailand or Singapore via various routes. Around 21 per cent entered Malaysia through the route “Bangladesh-Bangkok-Songkhla- through deep forest (on the back of car or truck)”; around 26 per cent through “Bangladesh-Hat Yai- Sungai – boat - forest-hill” and 13 per cent “Bangladesh – Bangkok – Yale - Sungai, Golok - forest-truck van”. However, around 27 per cent got to Malaysia from “Bangladesh- Singapore [directly] – Malaysia”. Only 3 per cent arrived directly from Dhaka (Table 2).

Irregular migration is gradually becoming more organized under the control of international rings. Analysis of the routes shows that the most attractive places for illegal entry into Malaysia are “Dhaka –Hat Yai- Sungai-then boat- forest-hill” and “Dhaka - Singapore [directly] – Malaysia”. While the mechanisms and tactics of those organizing the movement of irregular migrants change from time to time, the basic approaches remain unaltered. As a rule, the majority of illegal migrants say that they arrived in Thailand, where they came directly from Bangladesh.

To my surprise, while the final destination of the migrants was Malaysia, migrants did not know that they were going to Thailand, and were also unaware that they were not given



TABLE 1  
TYPE OF PERMIT HELD

Type of permit	Current status		Status when they entered	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Tourist	25	35.7	14	20.0
Work permit	10	14.3	10	14.28
No visa	23	32.9	42	60.0
No visa, no passport	6	8.6	–	–
Student visa	5	7.1	3	4.28
Business visa	1	1.4	1	1.43
Total	70	100.0	70	100.0

Source: Survey data 2005.

Note: “–” means that no data are available.

TABLE 2  
ROUTES TRAVELED

Routes	<i>f</i>	%
Dhaka-Bangkok-Songkhla- through deep forest (on the back of car or truck)	15	21.4
Dhaka –Hat Yai- Sungai-then boat- forest-hill	18	25.7
Dhaka –Bangkok- Yale-Sungai, Golok- forest-truck van	9	12.9
Dhaka - Singapore [directly] - Malaysia	19	27.1
Dhaka - [with tourist visa]- Malaysia [directly]	2	2.9
Dhaka - [with work visa]- Malaysia [directly]	7	10.0
Total	70	100.0

Source: Survey data 2005.

Malaysian visas. The brokers withheld the workers' passports until they were on board the aircraft so that they couldn't check the type of visa endorsed in the passport beforehand. All of them were given Thai tourist visas. This was possible because brokers conducted all immigration formalities on the migrants' behalf. One migrant said that once the full payment was made, the face of the brokers instantly turned different; that is, they started mistreating them. None of them had either a work contract or any other permit to enter Malaysia. That was why all of them had to enter Malaysia through illegal routes. But they were not just dumped in Malaysia; rather they were connected to employers. The traffickers at the final destination point maintain good linkages with some local construction firms and some other factories that seek cheap labour. The traffickers get a commission per labourer both from the employers and from the primary trafficker. The routes are constituted by a number of transit points. As shown already, the routes normally chosen by the traffickers are dependent on the extent of risks involved, and convenience in transferring victims to other points.

Transit points: Songkhla, a border province in southern Thailand adjoining the state of Kedah in Malaysia, covers an area of 7393.9 square kilometers, and is divided into 16 administrative units (<http://www.thailand-map.net>, downloaded in 2005). Sungai Golok Checkpoint is around one kilometre from Sungai Golok train station. From Narathiwat town, there are two routes: the first one takes highway No. 4055 (Narathiwat-Rangae), turns left at Ban

Manang Tayo, and takes Highway No. 4056 to Amphoe Sungai Padi into Sungai Golok (Forest Department, 2005). The second route takes highway No. 4084 from Narathiwat town to Amphoe Tak Bai, turns right to Highway No. 4057 (Tak Bai-Sungai Golok), and proceeds for another 66 kilometres (Forest Department, Government of Thailand, 2005; Hamilton, 2001). There is a bridge called Golok Bridge,<sup>8</sup> the main entrance and exit point between the two countries, symbolizes the harmonious interaction between the governments of Malaysia and Thailand.

From the transit points (Bangkok and Songkhla, etc.) the migrants and the traffickers gradually approach near the border areas, such as Hat Yai, Pattani, Songkhla, Yale, Narathiwat and Sungai Golok. When they receive a “green signal” from traffickers on the next point, they start their journey towards that destination. Migrants are handed over to a new group of traffickers at every new point. These routes have been too complex for them to remember the names of the many points they were transferred on from one to another group of traffickers. They did not know the names of the forests, hills and other points where they had to board boats. However, they remembered some major places such as Songkhla, Bangkok, Sungai Golok, Hat Yai and Yale. This means that their total journey was strictly guided by the traffickers. This reminds me the argument made by Light and colleagues (1989) that networks promote the independence of migratory flows because it reduces social, economic, and emotional costs of migration. Therefore, in another way this findings challenge the premise of network theory.

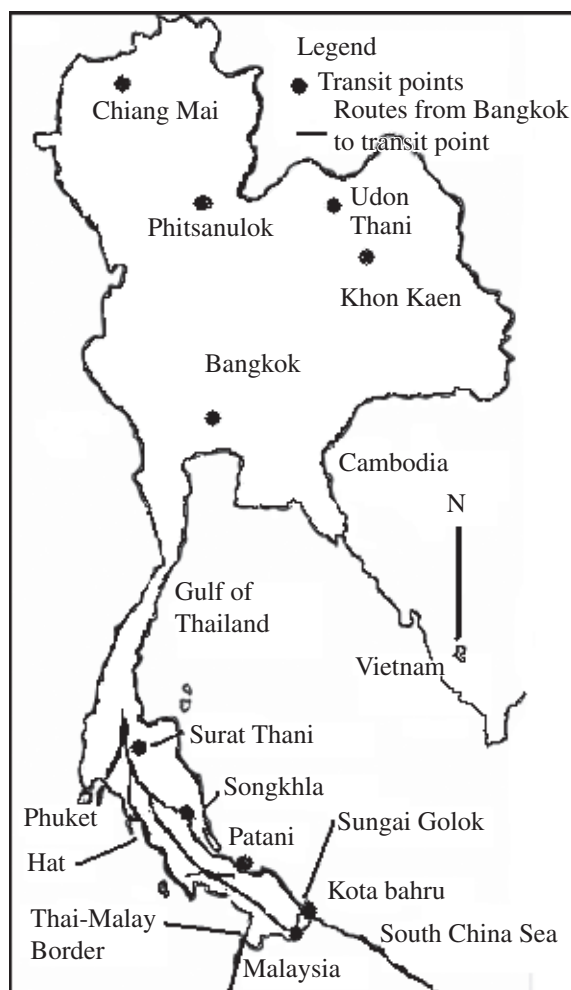
### THE MAGNITUDE OF HARDSHIP SUFFERED

This section describes the last leg of the long journey. Like a shipwrecked survivor, migrants from this vantage point already see the land beyond, only to be ensnared and tricked that it is the last stage of the battle. The risks that are involved have the capacity to make or break the success of the migrant to get entry to their much-desired destination. Migrant workers, particularly undocumented or unregulated workers, can face a host of concerns during the process of migration, and during their time in receiving countries. Employers, recruiters and traffickers stand by to exploit their predicament (ILO, 2003:4).

“...we were a group of seven youths. They asked us to get ready while in Songkhla and to start journeying for Malaysia at midnight. Later we were directed to a deep and dark forest. We stepped out without knowing where we were going” Mujib, a labourer in Kuala Lumpur.

The above excerpt from my interviews describes the consequence of this process and the scale of adversity suffered by such migrants en route to Malaysia. These migrants were forbidden to make any sound and they had no opportunity to retreat. They had to go forward, risking their lives, to an unknown destination. They walked six hours at a stretch at night. One of the respondents said that he heard loud screams from behind from one of the members of the group begging for help; however no one was allowed to look back. In the morning, when they stopped in a jungle to wait for night to come again, they found that one of their members was missing. No message about him was ever received. They feared he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died. A few others who arrived in Malaysia through the same route said that they found human skeletons in the deep jungle. They assumed that those skeletons might be of such ill-fated migrants. The brokers paid no attention. They heard later many stories of this kind from their compatriots. In silence, the group had to endure many days of living without shelter, without water for bathing, and in fear of snakes

MAP 2  
SHOWING THE ROUTES TAKEN TO GET INTO MALAYSIA FROM THAILAND.



and poisonous insects. River and sea crossings were part of the journey. One of respondents said, “While on board a small boat at dead of night on the sea, the feeling was that we could never arrive on the shore alive”. The migrants were forced to get out of the boat when it was at least 300–400 metres away from the shore.

“..... we swam ashore. It was like we were being killed by the traffickers. We had to swim to reach the shore with one hand and had to save our belongings with the other” Ratan, a labourer in Kajang.

Respondents narrating their hardship en route to Malaysia said that it was a life-threatening venture. Around 19 per cent said that they were bitten by snakes or poisonous insects, however they survived by applying indigenous treatments.<sup>9</sup> Around 59 per cent were bitten by big leeches, while 22 per cent had either major or minor wounds by

TABLE 3  
THE HAZARDS OF THE ROUTES

Hardship	<i>f</i>	%
Bitten by snake or other poisonous insects	6	18.75
Bitten by leeches	19	59.38
Wounded	7	21.88
Total	32	100.0

Source: Survey data 2005.

running into trees or stumbling on their way at night. Many others suffered dehydration and some suffered fever and jaundice. The majority reported weaknesses due to lack of sufficient food and due to mental stress, fear and uncertainty. All the miseries they experienced on their journey directly challenge the propositions of networks theory.

The usual flying time from Dhaka to Malaysia is around 3.5 hours. However, data show that around 50 per cent of the respondents took about one month to get to Malaysia; 29 per cent between one and two months; 12 percent required between two to three months; and about 10 per cent took more than three months to get to Malaysia (Table 4). Most of the time was spent in different hotels in Pratunam and Pahurat areas of Bangkok, and Songkhla while the brokers were exploring the routes and negotiating with the traffickers of respective transit points. Some respondents reported being kept in hotel in Bangkok for a few days and then shifted to another hotel. They are normally not kept in one hotel for many days. Many of them told the brokers promised them many times while in hotels in Bangkok that they were going to start for Malaysia and took them to Songkhla. They again moved back to Bangkok as they found the possible routes to Malaysia risky for them. They stayed back in Bangkok another two weeks, and then they started for Songkhla, then to Sungai Golok. For many of them this was repeated several times. They finally set off for Malaysia two months after their departure from Dhaka. In contrast, a person traveling legally could make the same journey safely in only four hours.

“... ..we were handed over at different points to different groups of people we had never seen before” Akhtar, a labourer in Johor Bahru.

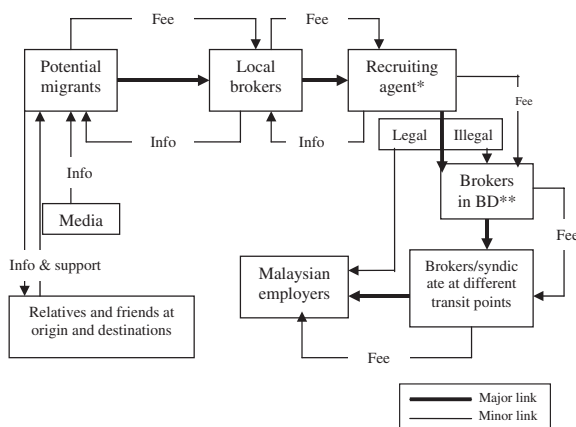
With respect to the difficult situation migrants might face in Malaysia and other places en route many migrants are aware of the difficulties they might face there. However, the poten-

TABLE 4  
JOURNEY TIME REQUIRED

Months	<i>f</i>	%
<1	21	50.0
1–2	12	28.57
2–3	5	11.90
>3	4	9.53
Total	42	100.0

Source: Survey data 2005.

FIGURE 1  
SHOWING THE MIGRATION NETWORK ADAPTED FROM RAHMAN 2004:382



tial migrants often filter out this negative information by focusing on the success stories of others who have actually reached the destinations. The information regarding the difficulties they might face during the journey seems to be of less importance.

The drinking water ran out about two days into the voyage, with the border of Malaysia far behind and the old wooden boat chugging through the Gulf of Thailand toward Kota Bahru. It took them hours to travel a 300–400-meter route as they had to go back and forth to avoid the gaze of the coastal guard. They begun this perilous crossing, and along the way they had gone without food and water. But there were still no land in sight the following morning when the motor stutters, as one respondent was narrating. The boatman tries a few times to restart it but it’s no use. Many others who were on board started screaming that they are doomed. All of them were praying to God for their survival. People inside the crowded boat became unconscious and semiconscious. For many, the treacherous voyage across the Sea is just the final leg of a months-long journey during which they risk their lives – at the hands of smugglers, in the backs of suffocating trucks, on the decks of leaking fishing boats – to reach Malaysia. The migrants’ sufferings were not limited only to the aforesaid difficulties, they extended to meager food and water supplied to them on the journey. Around 21 per cent survived without food for two days (on the way to Kota Bahru from Songkhla) due to inaccurate calculations about the length of the trip. They took dry food only for five days; however, it took more than seven days. The food ran out in four days.

TABLE 5  
FOOD ARRANGEMENT

Food served	<i>f</i>	%
Starved- 2 days	5	20.83
Drunk only water - 2 days	11	45.83
Ate dry food (biscuit, bread)- 3 days	8	33.33
Total	24	100.0

Source: Survey data 2005.

Around 46 per cent survived for two days with drinking water only, while 33 per cent had insufficient amounts of crackers and bread for three days. If the respondents would inquire if there was more water or food, the brokers pretended that they did not understand their language and remained indifferent.

Some degree of psychological stress is always involved whether migration is planned or not, voluntary or forced. Psychosocial stress of migrant workers emanates from the cultural shock and adaptation difficulties as they leave behind familiar socio-cultural system. Acculturative stress is a phenomenon that may underlie poor adaptation, including a reduction in the health status of individuals, identity confusion and problems in daily life. Despite the potential magnitude of the problem, the psychosocial health of migrant remains poorly addressed. Scarcity of resources necessitates trade-offs resulting in an opportunity cost. Therefore, migration decision that involves a choice between “to stay” and “not to stay” options has an opportunity cost. Due to migration they had forgone other alternatives. Furthermore, once migrants realize the real cost of a chosen alternative, they may begin to mull over the economics of their psychology because every migrant had to pay a “psychological price” while abroad. Along with the psychological and opportunity costs, there is a social cost involved as children grow up without their parents (Berry, 1992).

## CONCLUSIONS

Theoretically, migration networks are significant in the migration process as the key propositions of networks theory argue that such networks reduce the cost and risk of migration. This is how networks are known as facilitators of migration. Most migrant workers were found to rely on the assistance extended both by recruiting and interpersonal networks for their migration. Both empirically and theoretically, the cost and the risk are key factors in making migration decisions.

This paper has described the researcher’s discovery of the clandestine routes the migrants traversed to get to their destinations, and it has further shown that the migrants resorted to network syndicates, brokers and agencies, for their migration. Evidently, all of them suffered intolerable adversities on their journeys. Many circumstances such as exorbitantly prolonged journey time, dehumanizing treatment by the traffickers, secretive transfers at different points and false promises of job offers have made their migration very expensive and convoluted. This study moreover has directly challenged the main components of the network theory that is that networks are helpful in migration. Through the unabated growth of illegal recruiting agencies, lax governmental control, and widespread corruption of immigration officers leads to many tragedies and all these cause innocent migrants great suffering. The study found that employers often confiscate migrants’ documents, including passports and residence permits, restricting their freedom of movement and ability to report mistreatment. Migrants in undocumented or irregular situations are often indebted to traffickers, and have little choice but to work under highly exploitative conditions. Documented migrants can also easily slip into irregular status when unscrupulous employers deliberately let their permits expire, or literally sell workers to other employers, thereby invalidating their work permits. The extent of difference between expectations and forecasts the respondents in Malaysia held before migration and attainment after migration in absolute terms remains very challenging to single out. The study has evidenced that respondents at the destinations have been far away from their expectation thresholds. When the intangible losses are taken into consideration, their decision to migrate has been deemed as a loss of wealth, health and their youth.

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## NOTES

1. The Muslims consider Mecca in Saudi Arabia the holiest place in the world and they try to go there at least once in their lifetime to perform the religious duty of pilgrimage. In time, the attraction of countries in the Middle East declined due to ill-treatment by the employers and declining wages. Foreign workers in Saudi Arabia have systematically been abused and exploited, some of them living in conditions akin to slavery. Discrimination against women compounds the plight of female workers, some of whom have been victims of sexual abuse and forced confinement. Between 200 and 300 deaths of Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia are reported annually due to industrial accidents, murder, suicide, drowning, execution and stampede (Khan, 2003).
2. Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), one of the largest trade bodies in Bangladesh, is affiliated with the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and is the apex body of Trade and Industry. It was established in 1984 with a view to catering to the needs of the licensed recruiting agencies who promote the manpower market abroad. BAIRA trains and deploys a good number of unemployed Bangladeshi labourers in various foreign countries.
3. Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training was established in 1976 with a view to expediting employment opportunity: workers would only pay nominal fees as service charges in order to be sent abroad. Up to 1984, BMET arranged overseas employment for a significant number of persons. To encourage the private sector, recruiting agents were allowed to send workers under the regulatory control of the Bureau. BMET issues Emigration clearance when the ministry gives permission to recruit or when the ministry approves recruitment.
4. All acts and attempted acts involved in the recruitment, transportation within or across borders, purchase, sale, transfer, receipt or harbouring of a person involving the use of deception, coercion (including the use or threat of force or the abuse of authority) or debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding such person, whether for pay or not, in involuntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive), in forced or bonded labour, or in slavery-like conditions, in a community other than the one in which such person lived at the time of the original deception, coercion or debt bondage (BMET, 2006)
5. Standard deviation is 3.209, for more details see Ullah, 2005c.
6. Question: how did the migrants cross the immigration check posts at both points (origin and destination)? From the interviews, it was clear that the migrants with their passports did not deal with the officials at the immigration check posts, rather the brokers did. Evidently the immigration officers allowed the border crossings in exchange for bribe money.
7. "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." The definition of trafficking in human beings, included in the 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime) illustrates the process character of the phenomenon. This process is a continuum of events taking place in many locations, involving internationally linked criminal operators contributing their "services" (recruitment, transport, accommodation, document forgery, pimping, intimidation etc.) in various stages (United Nations, 2004).
8. Popularly known as *Jambatan Muhibah* (Harmonious Bridge).
9. A paste of masticated medicinal leaves was applied to the wound.

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