



**Emic perspectives on  
brokering international migration  
for construction  
from Bangladesh to Qatar**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents an emic perspective on the drivers and outcomes of migration brokerage through a study of low-skilled migrant construction workers from Chapainawabganj – a district in the north-west of Bangladesh – travelling to Qatar. The paper problematises assumptions underlying dominant discourses on the relationship between migrants and brokers by showing the differences in migrants' own perspectives on brokerage and the way in which the migrant welfare and humanitarian organisation narratives frame the process. The paper draws on interviews with migrants back in Bangladesh who were either on holiday before returning to Qatar again or who had completed a period of migration there and had returned home for good. It also draws on interviews with brokers in Chapainawabganj and Dhaka. The research on which this paper is based sought to understand why Bangladeshi men continued to migrate through brokers for construction work, despite all the efforts to discourage this practice. It also aimed to understand how migrants view the process themselves in terms of exploitation, hardship, success and failure and how closely this corresponds to the way in which it is conceptualised by outsiders. Finally we attempt to convey the long-term view that migrants take on the process in order to provide a different perspective on the costs and risks, as well as the benefits, of migration through brokers.

## Executive summary

This paper presents an emic perspective on the drivers and outcomes of migration brokerage through a study of low-skilled migrant construction workers from Chapainawabganj – a district in the north-west of Bangladesh – travelling to Qatar. The paper problematises assumptions underlying dominant discourses on the relationship between migrants and brokers by showing the differences in migrants' own perspectives on brokerage and the way in which the migrant welfare and humanitarian organisation narratives frame the process. The paper draws on interviews with migrants back in Bangladesh who were either on holiday before returning to Qatar again or who had completed a period of migration there and had returned home for good. It also draws on interviews with brokers in Chapainawabganj and Dhaka.

In the Bangladeshi moral discourse, brokers carry the pejorative descriptor of *Adam Bepari* or 'traders in the progeny of Adam (human beings)', typifying the view which gives all the power to the broker and deprives the migrant of any agency or control over the process. Similar discourses which demonise recruiters and victimise migrants prevail in other countries (Lindquist 2010). In Bangladesh such discourses have led to attempts to eliminate or heavily regulate migrant brokers through state-controlled manpower export companies and monitoring agencies. The research on which this paper is based sought to understand why Bangladeshi men continued to migrate through brokers for construction work despite all the efforts to discourage this practice. It also aimed to understand how migrants view the process themselves in terms of exploitation, hardship, success and failure and how closely this corresponds to the way in which it is conceptualised by outsiders. International migration for construction work from Bangladesh is highly gendered, with the majority of workers being male.

We deploy an analytical framework that examines the experience of migrating through brokers from the perspective of the migrants themselves, as few studies exist which have taken such an approach – although see, for example, Koser (1997), Spener (2009) or van Liempt (2007). Furthermore, this research will fill the gap of examining brokerage at origin and at destination through interviews with local brokers and migrants – something which very few studies have done to date (Carswell and De Neve 2013; Lindquist *et al.* 2012) as most have focused on recruitment through interviews at destination. In theorising our findings we draw on the recent literature on brokerage which focuses on the social relationships that underpin the contract between migrants and agents. Ethnographies of the relationship between them have delved deeper into social bonds of trust, how these are forged and what recourse migrants have if promises are not kept. Lindquist (2010), for example, analyses those ethical qualities that are embodied in brokers that convince villagers that they are in safe hands. In a similar vein, Alpes (2013), in her study in Cameroon, shows that understanding brokerage requires an understanding of local power dynamics and social relations. Finally we attempt to convey the long-term view that migrants take on the proc, in order to provide a different perspective on the costs and risks, as well as the benefits, of migration through brokers. As Alpes (2013) notes, the exploitation and risks faced by migrants should be viewed against the risk and vulnerabilities that aspiring migrants would face at home in a context of extreme poverty and a lack of well-paid work.

## Introduction

This paper presents the findings from a study on brokerage in migration for construction work in Qatar among Bangladeshi men from the district of Chapainawabganj, a mango-producing area near the Indian border. It aims to convey how the costs, risks and advantages of migration through informal brokers are viewed by the men in terms of their impact on the men themselves and their families. In doing so, it reveals a more complex picture of the relationship between migrants and brokers and challenges the dominant public discourse that demonises brokers and victimises migrants. Contrary to the way in which brokers are demonised in these accounts, migrants' own accounts indicate a more-nuanced relationship based on culturally grounded notions of trust and reciprocity. While the hardships encountered by migrants may lead outsiders to regard their migration as a failure, the migrants themselves describe the process in more ambivalent terms and appear to accept hardship, as well as some cheating by the brokers, as necessary costs in their quest for a better future. The variation between the promises of brokers and what is delivered in terms of wages and working conditions is accepted because the ultimate goal of migrating abroad seems to override other considerations. While outsiders measure the success or failure of migration against the yardstick of decent work, labour laws and personal freedom, migrants themselves have in mind long-term goals of self-development and the advancement of their families; brokers are indispensable in achieving that goal. The paper draws on interviews with migrants back in Bangladesh who were either on holiday before returning to Qatar again or who had completed a period of migration there and had returned home for good. It also draws on interviews with brokers in Chapai Nawabganj and Dhaka.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member-states have emerged as important destinations for Bangladeshi workers since the early 1970s (Rahman 2012). Bangladeshi migrants remitted more than \$15.3 billion in 2015 to Bangladesh (Siddiqui *et al.* 2016). Many are employed in construction as masons, carpenters and 'rod benders' and studies show that they have occupied specific niches in construction together with workers from neighbouring countries in South Asia, including Nepal and India. Amongst the material drivers of labour migration for construction work in Bangladesh are land shortages and a lack of remunerative work opportunities (Afsar 2009; Martin *et al.* 2014) but, due to the heavy costs of international migration, only those with the ability to draw on social networks and capital are able to make the journey.

The recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in large numbers to serve the ever-expanding construction sector in Qatar has been made possible by the presence of a large migration 'industry' (Castles *et al.* 2014: 235) involving a range of formal and informal institutions and individuals, including recruitment agencies, travel agents, medical testing centres, training centres and informal brokers (Afsar 2009; Mahmood 1991) or what Lindquist (2012) refers to as 'the infrastructure of migration'.

In the moral discourse of migrant welfare and humanitarian approaches within government NGOs, researchers and aid agencies, brokers are portrayed as powerful and unscrupulous individuals who exploit defenceless migrants. Migrants are the victims in this discourse and brokers are accused of deceiving them with false promises, charging exorbitant and illegal fees, trapping them in debt, switching jobs and confiscating their passports, making it virtually

impossible for the migrants to turn back and escape (DLA Piper 2014: 30). A report on migrant labour recruitment in Qatar submitted to the Qatar Foundation Migrant Worker Welfare Initiative summarises the evils of the system of brokerage through which workers are brought into the country:

The high costs that workers have to pay (from \$600–\$5,000) are far beyond the maximum allowable by their country-of-origin governments and are essentially a form of extortion by agents to secure the jobs in Qatar. To pay these costs they commonly sell family assets and enter into debt with usurious interest rates of between 30–60%; a practice that violates Islamic finance ethics (Jureidini 2014: xi).

The money paid to recruitment agencies is a type of investment for the migrant worker, but more importantly, if he has had to borrow money to pay these fees, there is substantial pressure to follow through with whatever contractual arrangements are made in order to repay the debt. Even if the migrant worker used his own savings, or was given, or borrowed money from his family or friends, there is a powerful obligation to recoup that money and pay it back. The debt establishes a momentum of vulnerability and dependence upon those who are employing him. He must agree to and conform with whatever is asked of him until his debts are repaid and he has established the financial security of his family back home – an enormous burden that too often results in jobs being performed with wages and conditions that are unacceptable. The individual may not want to work under the circumstances being offered, but is required to do so because the alternative of returning home empty-handed is not considered an option. Thus, he is also engaged in a form of ‘forced labour’ (Jureidini 2014: 30).

In the Bangladeshi moral discourse, brokers carry the pejorative descriptor of *Adam Bepari* or ‘traders in human bodies’, typifying the view which gives all the power to the broker and deprives the migrant of any agency or control over the process. Similar discourses which demonise recruiters and victimise migrants prevail in other countries (Lindquist 2010; McKeown 2012; Spener 2009; van Liempt and Sersli 2013). In Bangladesh such discourses have led to attempts to eliminate or heavily regulate migrant brokers; for example, Bangladesh has set up the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL) – a state-owned manpower exporting company – and also a database where details of aspiring migrants’ skills and experience are entered so that they can be matched to employers, thereby eliminating the middleman. Additionally, a Prevention of Illegal Migration Task Force has been set up to conduct random checks on outbound international passengers to ensure that undocumented migration through informal brokers does not take place. However, experience has shown that such attempts have usually failed and informal brokers have continued to be an indispensable part of the migration process, especially for those who come from relatively poor and poorly educated backgrounds.

The research on which this paper is based sought to understand why Bangladeshis continued to migrate through brokers for construction work despite all the efforts to discourage this practice. It also aimed to understand how the migrants themselves view the process in terms of exploitation, hardship, success and failure and how closely this corresponds to the way in which it is conceptualised by outsiders.

The emergence of a 'migration industry' which facilitates the mobility of people has long been discussed in academia. Early conceptualisations viewed the migration industry purely as a 'business', where each layer of intermediary between the migration and the destination stood to make a profit from the movement (Goss and Lindquist 1995; Salt and Stein 1997). However, such an approach, which does not endow migrants with any agency in the process, has been critiqued by some scholars (Spaan 1994).

In terms of causes for the emergence and perpetuation of brokerage, a key assumption is that increasingly complex regulations – that must be negotiated by the migrant to reach their destination – require brokers who are better informed about legal procedures and requirements. In other words, brokers have emerged as a response to tightening migration regimes (Castles 2004), especially where migration control is becoming increasingly centralised and recruitment is sub-contracted (Rodriguez 2010). Hernández-León (2005) went one step further by arguing that brokers' profit-making would drive migration flows even if no opportunities existed at the other end. While Castles (2004) saw the main role of brokers as helping migrants navigate increasingly complex state regulations, conversely Kyle and Koslowski (2011) and Spener (2009) have shown how brokers help individuals to circumvent, rather than comply with, immigration controls. In the Bangladeshi case, we see examples of both; brokers who assist with navigating legal requirements and others who can bypass them altogether.

In view of the findings that were emerging from this work, it was felt that an analytical framework that examines the experience of migrating through brokers from the perspective of the migrants themselves would be a useful addition to the literature. Few studies exist which have taken such an approach – although see, for example, Koser (1997), Spener (2009) or van Liempt (2007). Furthermore, this research should fill the gap of examining brokerage at origin and at destination through interviews with local brokers and migrants – something which very few studies have done to date (Carswell and De Neve 2013; Lindquist *et al.* 2012) as most have focused on recruitment through interviews at destination.

In theorising our findings we draw on the recent literature on brokerage which focuses on the social relationships underpinning the contract between migrants and agents. Ethnographies of these relationships have delved deeper into social bonds of trust, how these are forged and what recourse migrants have if promises are not kept. Lindquist, for example, analyses the ethical qualities that are embodied in brokers and which convince villagers that they are in safe hands.

If we want to understand how villagers become migrants it is critical to pay ethnographic attention to informal brokers and their practices. The issue of trust – meaning, most generally, 'confidence in one's expectations' – appears especially critical in environments where there are great cultural and economic divides between rural and urban spaces. PL such as Pak Haji thus come to function not only as labour recruiters but also as cultural brokers, as the one position is infused with the other (Lindquist 2012: 75).

In a similar vein, Alpes (2013), in her study of brokerage in Cameroon, shows that understanding brokerage requires in-depth knowledge of local power dynamics and social relations – knowing what is acceptable in deceit and what is not – in their own terms, i.e. emic descriptions of risk and morality rather than externally imposed ones.

Locally grounded terminology – for example, feymen, doki men and big men – sheds new light on to migration trajectories which, in countries of arrival, might otherwise be framed as smuggling or trafficking. Brokers who do not put their means at the disposal of aspiring migrants will be shamed as ‘feymen’. Migration brokers whose means are merely based on the imitation of papers will be devalued as ‘doki men’. Migration brokers whose connections for once fail will be able to upkeep their status as ‘big men’ if they have past success cases to show for (Alpes 2013: 12–13).

Rudnyckyj (2004) analyses the relations between aspiring migrants and brokers through the lens of moralities because they are rooted in values, emotions and norms and not only in legal and bureaucratic competencies. However, he draws a distinction between traditional patron–client relationships that are found in agrarian societies and migration brokerage, where the broker’s capacity to deliver on promises is limited over the entire process:

... the ‘moral economy’ between brokers and migrant laborers characterized by an ethic of reciprocity distinctive to patron–client networks may not be quite as pronounced as that described in other previous studies of agrarian social relations. While prospective migrants and their families may assume the broker will provide for her [*sic*] security, the broker’s ability to do so is by no means certain (Rudnyckyj 2004: 415).

Wise (2013) also questions the ability of local brokers to fulfil promises as she traces the nature of social relationships that characterise pyramidal structures of recruitment at different levels, from the village-level broker to the employer and the several layers of brokers in between. She argues that the moral bond between the migrant and the broker is diluted as s/he moves further up the chain. As the relationship becomes less personal, the moral consequences of breaking the verbal contract are less severe.

Finally we attempt to convey the long-term view that migrants take on the process in a bid to provide a different perspective on the costs and risks, as well as the benefits, of migration through brokers. As Alpes (2013) notes, the exploitation and risks faced by migrants should be viewed against the risk and vulnerabilities that aspiring migrants would face at home in a context of extreme poverty and a lack of well-paid work. In fact, she argues, to not have a family member abroad is a risk for families in Cameroon.

## **Methodology**

The data were collected mainly through qualitative interviews, as the purpose of the research was to understand the social relationships that underpin brokerage as well as the negotiations and strategies employed by brokers at different points in the migration process. Fieldwork was undertaken at both origin (Chapainawabganj) and intermediate points in Dhaka.



Altogether 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted: ten with migrants who were back home, either between contracts or on holiday, 18 with formal and informal intermediaries and ten with other stakeholders, including officials of the Gomostapur sub-district unit and the Chapai district unit of the Construction Workers' Union.

In order to recruit participants, the study team contacted interviewees covered in earlier surveys<sup>1</sup> from whom consent had been obtained to revisit them for future studies. Access to intermediaries was initiated by one of the research team members who developed a good rapport with the manager of a travel agency in Chapai town – who, himself, was a returnee international migrant. The latter then put the team in touch with migrant construction workers from Qatar who were home on holiday. They, in turn, put the team in touch with informal brokers who worked for formal recruitment agencies in Dhaka. After much persuasion, the informal intermediaries for international migrants agreed to participate in discussions.

Other brokers higher up in the chain were identified through different methods, including drawing upon accumulated knowledge within the RMMRU and snowballing with information collected from respondents. There was a good response to the interview questions from most of the migrant construction workers. However, we had to explain in advance why we needed to have long conversations with them. Consent for voice recording was obtained and they were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity in accordance with University of Sussex procedures. Unlike the migrants and informal intermediaries in Chapai, the brokers and stakeholders in Dhaka were not always cooperative because they could not spend long periods of time with the research team. Some of them were apprehensive about revealing information on illegal activities that could get them into trouble.

### **Chapainawabganj**

Chapainawabganj lies near the border with India and is a highly fertile mango-producing area. Due to the number of rivers passing through, fishing is also a major economic activity. However, agricultural livelihoods are being threatened by droughts and riverbank erosion and these two climate-linked reasons are thought to underlie migration towards Dhaka (Martin *et al.* 2014). Seasonal migration within the country in order to manage shortfalls in income is widespread and is undertaken mainly by poorer people (Siddiqui 2012). However, there is a growing trend towards long-distance international migration to the Gulf, undertaken by better-off households who may have resources from agriculture or savings from internal migration (Gardner 2009).

### **Migration to Qatar**

With a small population and high growth rates, Qatar is heavily dependent on migrant labour – so much so that 85 per cent of its population is comprised of migrants on temporary work contracts (DLA Piper 2014). Bangladeshi migration to the Gulf countries for construction work is male-dominated due to cultural norms related to women's international migration and work. Until recently, women were not allowed to migrate internationally from Bangladesh due to government policies rooted in such cultural beliefs (Dannecker 2005). Now, the

migration of women is significant but into other occupations – such as domestic work – that are stereotypically assigned to women (Siddiqui 2008).

Much of the recruitment is through a network of formal and informal agents and, according to one estimate, the average cost paid by migrants is \$1,250 – a hefty sum to procure for those from relatively poor backgrounds (DLA Piper 2014).<sup>2</sup> Actual interviews with migrants analysed later in the paper show wide variation between costs, even for migrants travelling to the same destination for similar jobs – clearly a form of ‘price discrimination’ which operates in a context of poor regulation and corruption.

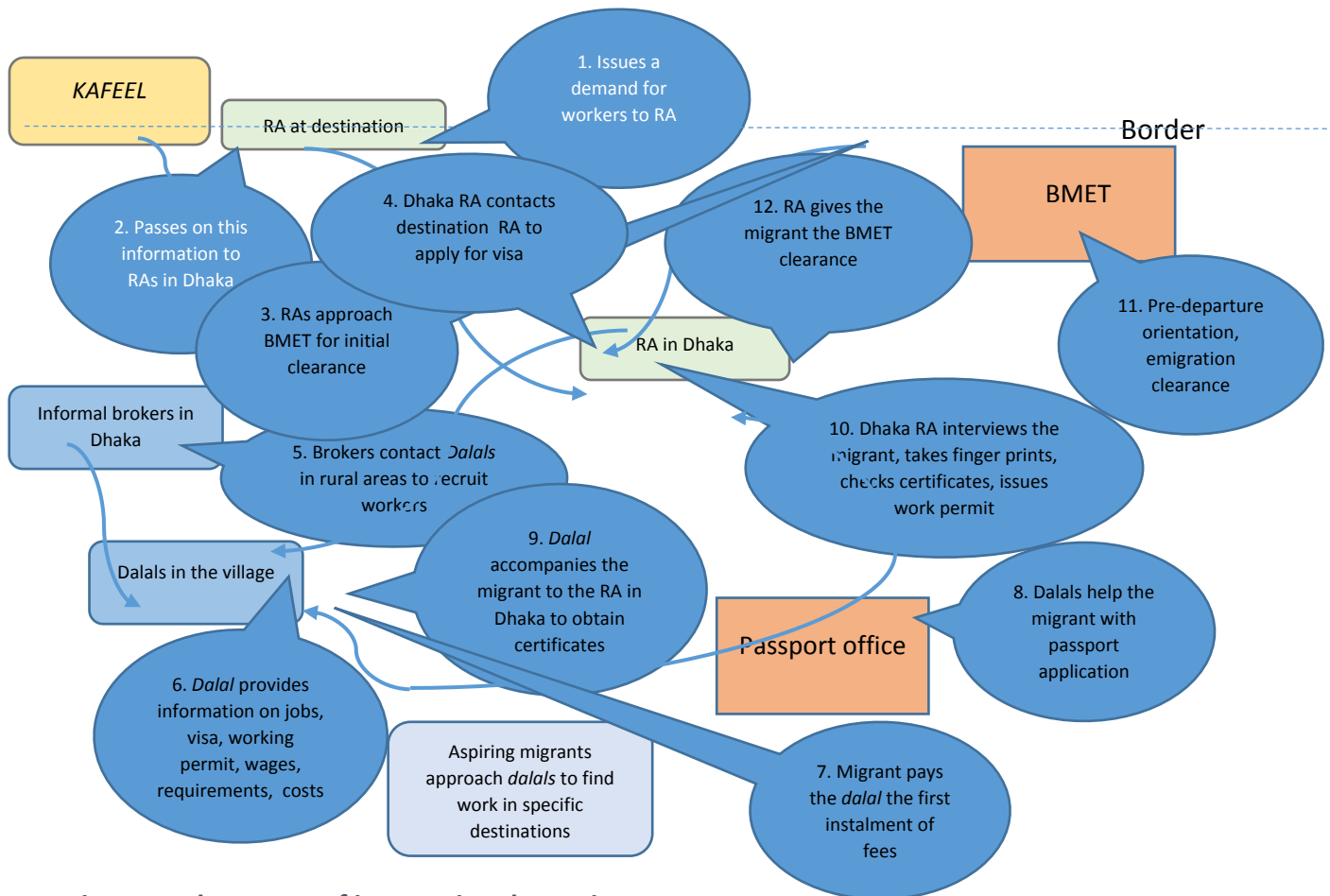
All employment of foreigners in Qatar is regulated through the *Kafala* system, where certain organisations or individuals are issued permits for employing foreign workers on short-term contracts. These possessors of permits, known as *Kafeels*, agree to take full responsibility for the worker who is tied to them through the permit and visa. The chain of recruitment starts with the *Kafeel* approaching a recruitment agent to hire workers who meet certain requirements of skills and experience. However an illegal system of ‘visa trading’ is widespread, where *Kafeels* sell the permits on the black market to recruiters who then charge exorbitant fees to workers to facilitate migration. Visas obtained through such a route may not lead to a job and migrants become illegal migrants as soon as they enter the country (Rahman 2012; Shah 2008). Nevertheless, as we discuss later in the paper, these ‘free’ visas are much sought after, because they give the workers the freedom to choose where they work and how they chart out their future.

### *The recruitment process*

Once Qatari recruitment agents (RAs) have been tasked with finding workers, they approach their counterparts in Bangladesh<sup>3</sup> with a request for workers and the Bangladeshi RA approaches the BMET (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training) for the first level of official clearance. BMET is a body under the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment, responsible for regulating formally registered recruitment agencies, issuing emigration clearances, checking the authenticity of visas and employment contracts and safeguarding the welfare of Bangladeshi migrants overseas (Rahman 2012). The actual recruitment of workers takes place through BOESL, recruitment agencies and informal brokers, constituting what Rahman calls ‘a semi-coherent system of governance that facilitates smooth flows of labour overseas’ (Rahman 2012: 221). Once BMET clearance is secured, the RA can start recruiting and asking workers to submit all the documents needed – including passports, pictures, certificates of work experience, medical certificates and partial payment of fees. The RA also contacts the RA in Qatar to start processing the visa. The visa is issued to the *Kafeel* and this is then passed to the Qatari and the Bangladeshi RAs. The time lapse between applying for a visa and boarding a plane can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. Theoretically, the Bangladeshi RA should be able to find workers on the government-created database but, as the account below shows, this is fraught with problems. The head of a reputed recruitment agency with liaison offices in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman and Algeria describes the unusability of the official database:

For us the database is nothing but ‘junk’. About a year ago I got a demand for 150 women for a Dubai school that needed workers to help students and take care of them. The requirement

was literacy and general smartness. I informed the government about this, and it issued letters to 450 women from which the employer was asked to choose. At the stipulated date only about 50 turned up. Of them only four replied that they had passports. After medical check-up only one was selected. The team cancelled the contract and took the offer to some other country. Given these problems, RAs continue to depend on informal brokers. The diagram below illustrates a typical recruitment process, which combines formal and informal agents:



**Figure 1. The stages of international recruitment**

The process is somewhat different for those with social networks at destination, who may arrange for their visa to be sent directly to them. Friends and relatives can procure both fixed-term and free visas and send them directly to the aspiring migrant in the village. The Migrating out of Poverty Research Consortium’s survey of 1,205 households covering 51 villages in districts including neighbouring Rajshahi district found that 54 per cent had a job arranged by a family member or friend before they migrated internationally (to the Gulf, India and South-East Asia) (Litchfield *et al.* 2015). Research conducted by Baey and Yeoh (2015) on the migration of Bangladeshi construction workers to Singapore reported a similar trend.

Dhaka-based RAs rely on sub-agents, including village-level brokers known as *dalals*, to recruit unskilled workers because they have neither the ability to extend their own network to rural areas nor the personal links that are so critical in building rapport and confidence in the migrant. Sub-agents often work at the district, town (in this case, Rajshahi was the nearest

town for migrants from Chapainawabganj) or city level (Dhaka), where official clearances need to be obtained. Sub-agents act as mediators between the migrants and the recruitment agencies – taking a fee from both (Rahman 2011). They play a critical role in matching the demands of employers with the supply of labourers and they assist the migrant in obtaining the necessary paperwork, medical check-ups and transportation to the airport.

Sub-agents come from a variety of backgrounds, as our case studies show; they can be travel agents, drivers or urban professionals. What they have in common is entrepreneurial skills and the capacity to develop personal relationships with a variety of institutions that are important for obtaining documentation and clearances from government bodies. These typically include the recruitment agencies that employ them, medical testing centres, emigration officials and passport offices. Sub-agents must also depend on another tier of recruiter – the front line *dalal* who is the first point of recruitment. The sub-agent is often someone who originates from Chapainawabganj but is now based in a town or city. While he<sup>4</sup> is able to translate and match the expectations and offers from both sides – i.e. the city-based RA and the migrant – he relies on the local *dalal* to do the actual recruitment of the migrant in the rural area.

We first train the spotlight on the relationship between the *dalal* and the migrant, as it is the former's job to inspire confidence in the migrant and his family. The typical *dalal* or local broker is a well-respected member of the community – either a religious leader or a professional who, as Lindquist (2012: 86) says, 'embodies the social position and many of the ethical qualities that are considered critical in the recruitment process'. To become a *dalal* requires social skills that allow them to navigate official processes and territories which would be frightening for the average rural resident arriving in a big city such as Dhaka. Village-level brokers fulfill several functions; they may act as a referee for money-lenders so that migrants can obtain loans to finance their migration (Rahman 2011) and for those who have no contacts at destination, they may become a conduit for information about the welfare of the migrant once he has left for his destination overseas (Lindquist 2012). Our interviews suggest that they also advise migrants on which jobs to apply for and whether or not visas are 'good', an observation also made by Afsar (2009).

We discuss select cases that, in our view, provide valuable insights into the recruitment process, the social relationships and notions of reciprocity in which they are embedded and the ways in which the migrants analyse the experience. In order to present contrasting examples, we discuss one typical case of someone who migrated through the official route – i.e. a registered recruitment agent in Dhaka – and one who migrated through his own social network, bypassing the official machinery in Bangladesh to obtain a 'free visa'.

Mohammad is a fairly typical international migrant from Chapainawabganj<sup>5</sup> in terms of his age and skill profile. He migrated through the official route, i.e. through an officially registered RA in Dhaka, taking all the clearances and certificates that are required by both sides. Like many other migrants from his village, he comes from a relatively poor background<sup>6</sup> and decided to migrate because he saw no remunerative opportunities in farming and had heard about the success of others who had migrated abroad. Although his family is not well-off, they had the capacity to borrow from local money-lenders to fund his migration and they supported his decision in the expectation that he would send remittances. He decided to

migrate through Rahman, a well-known *dalal* in the area whom he refers to as ‘uncle’ (a typical way of referring to elders in the community in South Asia). Uncle had promised to ‘manage everything’ to send him abroad. We interviewed Mohammad while he was back in the village for a break.

When I asked if he (‘Uncle’) could send me abroad he said he will take some steps and asked me to make a passport. Both of us went to Rajshahi (large administrative centre) to make the passport. After getting the passport I heard that a company from Kantar is interested to take some men. Uncle asked me whether I wanted to go. I agreed.

Mohammad refers to the broker in a respectful tone and appreciates all the help that he received from him during the visa application process. ‘Uncle’ kept his promise of helping with each step of the application: he accompanied Mohammad to Dhaka, to the RA known as ‘Taj Office’, went with him to the certification centre and explained the application procedure for obtaining a health certificate and helped Mohammad to prepare for his interview at Taj for the visa and work permit. ‘Uncle’ then handed Mohammad over to a sub-agent known as the ‘branch office of Taj’, with whom he clearly had established links. Brokers like Rahman can mediate negotiations using terms that have cultural meaning across the divide of the different actors and institutions that constitute the migration industry. They are at once comfortable with the language and culture of multiple parties and can translate expectations, pre-conditions, costings and deliverables between them. This sub-agent in Dhaka helped Mohammad with other procedures such as registering on the migrant database, BMET clearance and ticketing. The *dalals* and sub-agents learn how to work the system through observation, contact with other brokers and their own experiences.

Mohammad paid for his and Uncle’s tickets to Dhaka and the charges of the certification centres but he did not pay upfront for any of the assistance that he received from either the *dalal* or the sub-agent, as they assured him that he would pay only after the visa was received. The visa and passport were delivered to Mohammad after three months.

The trust that Mohammad placed in ‘Uncle’ was absolute – so much so that he accepted whatever work and wage conditions the broker could offer. When asked whether he had enquired about the wages that he would be paid, he replied:

I asked but at that time I was very ignorant about foreign countries. I did not even know which company is good or bad. That’s why I asked ‘Uncle’. He told me that I am his loved one and whatever is good for me he will definitely do that only. Then I went to attend the interview (in Dhaka). ‘Uncle’ said I should have money ready as they visa may come quickly.

The exchange above shows that Mohammad was confident in the broker’s ability to deliver the best deal, because the latter is a well-respected person in the community and has a reputation for delivering what he promises. He is perceived by Mohammad and others in the community as possessing the competencies required to understand the bureaucratic processes of migration. Rahman sealed the moral contract between them by reminding Mohammad of the co-ethnic bond that they shared as they belonged to same community.

Clearly, in addition to technical knowledge, Rahman also possesses an understanding of cultural norms of behaviour that will remove doubt from the minds of prospective clients. It is these qualities that make for a good recruiter (Lindquist 2010).

There were dialectical aspects to the relationship, as Mohammad also called on his co-ethnic bond and kinship ties to negotiate a better rate and a suitable schedule of payment. He was asked for 2 *lakhs* (*taka* 200,000) but he bargained it down to *taka* 185,000 and asked to pay after the visa had arrived.

I told him that we are very near and dear and I have the money ready. I promised to hand it over after the visa arrives. He had faith in me and told me it was OK. Then he one day told me that visa had come. I told him that I could deliver the money to his house if he wanted. He told me about my flight and about going to the airport. He also explained the rules and regulations of the airport.

Mohammad was well aware that it would cost him much more to migrate through a *dalal* but felt that he had some protection through the relationship with him compared to the formal route of migration (approaching the RA in Dhaka directly) where payments have to be made upfront with no guarantee of the money being recovered.

There are two systems of getting a visa. One is by the Taj office and another is through a supervisor (*dalal*). If I migrate through a supervisor, I can get my money back if there is a problem. But people who migrate through the Taj office will not get their money back if there is a problem. ... How could I give such a big amount of money to an unknown office?

Similar sentiments were expressed by other migrants, who said that they were comfortable with paying the *dalal* large amounts of money because they felt they could 'reach him any time', whereas recruiting agencies in Dhaka were harder to hold to account if anything went wrong. They felt that applying social pressure to the *dalal* through their families would force him to pay them back, should a deal go sour. The greatest advantage, according to them, was that *dalals* accepted money only after the paperwork had been done whereas formal agents in the city required payments in advance, which evoked suspicion and a feeling of not being in control of the situation.

Mohammad views his migration as a success. After eight years, he was receiving a basic salary of QAR 1,400 with a possibility of earning up to QAR 2,000 a month with overtime payments. He feels that his family is much better off now that he remits between 25,000 and 50,000 *taka* a month. He has repaid his relatives, built a new four bed-roomed house and bought some land which his brother cultivates. He is planning to save so that he can invest in a high-return business back home, such as a dealership for farm inputs or a fisheries pond on lease.

#### *A matter of prestige*

Unlike the contract between a migrant and a formal recruitment agency in the city, the moral contract with a *dalal* in the village involves not just the migrant but his family and the extended community. The contract, which is never written down, is often witnessed by family

members or village elders, locally known as *Matbors*, who traditionally mediate disputes. Although the migration of men does not involve the same kind of social negotiation that would be seen in the case of women or girls, where permission would have to be sought from guardians and personal protection guaranteed, there is still negotiation with the parents and relatives of men, who seek assurance that their passage will be safe and their man will get a good job.

While migrants were often cheated in terms of discrepancies between promised and actual wages and working conditions, as we discuss later in the paper, the discourses in the village showed that, even though migrants complained about these, they did not take action against the brokers. What did attract strong disapproval, however, was when a broker took money and failed to ensure the safe passage of the migrant. Jalal, another migrant from the village, describes such a scenario:

A *dalal* fled without repaying the money when he failed to send the client abroad and he used the money to go abroad himself. However, he had to pay back later because if he had not, he would not be able to return to the village. In such cases the broker might say, 'I owe you one lac (*taka* 100,000), I am returning 50,000 *taka*, let us settle it in the village *Shalish* (customary dispute resolution committee of village elders. This kind of *Shalish* has occurred in the village.

Nevertheless, such occurrences are rare because brokers will try their best to prevent failure. Some have even spent their own money to ensure that the migration contract is fulfilled. One broker said, pointing to another:

This man has spent his own money to help people to migrate. That is why they (aspiring migrants) will not give money to you [but they will give it to] us...there is social prestige and status at stake. If problems arise as they often do, we settle them ourselves.

Another broker said:

In this work we need money, power and prestige. [He feels he must ensure that the process is completed without complication, otherwise his reputation is at stake]. If the migration fails, we are in the firing line. Because, we live closest to the migrants, they depend on us. If anything goes wrong, the RA will take no responsibility.

Research in other contexts has shown that maintaining a reputation is essential to securing the position of broker in the community. As Bilger *et al.* (2006) note in the context of human smuggling in Austria, migrants put a high premium on the 'good reputation' and 'trustworthiness' of their handlers. Kyle and Liang (2001) also highlight the need for trust between migrants and smugglers and within migrant smuggling schemes.

### 'Free' visas

The number of irregular migrant workers in Qatar is unknown; they are usually individuals who have entered the country through 'free visas' (Jureidini 2014: 87) or who may have remained in the country and on the black labour market after their visa has expired and because they do not have a legal *Kafeel*. Many migrate through personal connections; between 1976 and 2008 more than 68 per cent or 2.88 million workers migrated through their own social networks (Rahman 2011). They are often helped by relatives or contacts who were former migrants themselves or connected to employers through social ties. However, in our sample, all but one migrant used brokers. International migration from Chapai is a relatively recent phenomenon and migration through established social networks has not taken off. A 'free visa' is a visa procured by a *kafeel*, who will not employ the migrant but who will sell the visa on to a recruiting agent or other person who, in turn, sells it on through several intermediaries to the aspiring migrant. Such *kafeels* can include companies in Qatar that have unused visas which they sell to agents. The free visa system is common in the construction industry, and it is in this way that workers have occupations others than those listed on their visa and work permit. The free visa is legal until the migrant starts working for someone other than the *kafeel*, at which point he becomes illegal by law and can be deported (Rahman 2011). In other words, the free visa is always illegal. It has been noted by O'Connell Davidson (2013) that running away from legal sponsors to work illegally in the informal economy is a strategy employed by migrants to secure greater personal freedom, pay off debts and remit money to dependants, albeit under constant threat of detection and deportation.

There are 'kick-back' fees that go to the sponsors for renewing such visas and the failure to pay results in threats of deportation. There are worries that such arrangements trap the migrant at the mercy of corrupt sponsors and agencies in degrading work arrangements. They need the signature of the *kafeel* to leave the country, further compounding their dependence. While the workers may have an ID card for one company, they may be working for several. The *kafeel* charges to release the worker, so that the latter can pursue other jobs. If the worker is arrested, he is protected by the *kafeel*, who will state that the worker is his/her employee.

We discuss one such case below, where the entire migration process had been completed without any contact with BMET or the ministry. These interviews show that free visas are much sought after among aspiring migrants. The process of recruitment involves informal brokers throughout – from the village-level *dalal* to the agent at destination – and the average price of a free visa is QAR 25,000. Relatives are often an important part of the process because they are a trusted source of information and know whether the visa being offered is a good or 'Bhalo' visa', as Afsar (2009) noted in her research on brokerage in migration to the Gulf. Friends and relatives may also help with procurement of the work permit and identification of a *bonafide* recruitment agency. The role of friends and family in enabling migration is well known (Boyd 1989).

Twenty-six-year-old Aktar, who has been a migrant in Qatar for the last five years together with his brother, had decided to migrate because he was not interested in the family business of mango cultivation. His maternal uncle had also been in Qatar for a number of years and,



on one of his return visits, Aktar asked him to take him there. His uncle sent him a visa after a few months. He told Aktar to approach a *dalal* in Dhaka to get a manpower card and the ticket for the flight. Aktar was promised 950 Riyals a month but did not see a contract until he arrived in Qatar. He realised that something was seriously wrong when he showed the company his manpower card, which described him as a carpenter.

My interview was taken when I went there. The job I was assigned to was the job of carpenter which I found out through my card on which it was written. As I didn't know much about the job of a carpenter they scolded me for coming there without enough knowledge of the job assigned. They also threatened me that I will be sent back to my country.

What Aktar is describing is the notorious process of 'contract substitution', where the conditions and salary approved by the employee prior to departure are replaced after arrival by a contract with reduced benefits. By this time it is usually too late to refuse or turn back. The most common forms of deception under contract substitution involve salary levels, working hours and type of employment (Gardner *et al.* 2013, cited in Jureidini 2014: 87). An official from the Planning Commission confirms that this is a widespread phenomenon where unskilled workers are recruited for skilled positions. He recalled seeing papers for a group of 21 workers who were recruited as carpenters but of whom none were.

Aktar was paid QAR 700 instead of the QAR 950 that he was promised but there was little that he could do because he had no way of contacting the *dalal*. The *dalal* could not protect Aktar against the deviation away from the terms of the original contract and nor could Aktar hold him accountable because the 'contract substitution' was done by the employer and not the *dalal*. As argued by Rudnyckyj (2004) and Wise (2013), the ability of the village broker to protect the client is diluted because of the complex and pyramidal structure of recruitment where moral contract is diluted as they move further away from the local community. Interestingly, however, Aktar decided not take any action against the *dalal* after he returned home because his goals of migrating to Qatar and obtaining a free visa were fulfilled, as we discuss below.

When asked what he did when he found out that his salary was less than promised, Aktar replied 'Brothers from Bangladesh told me have patience and the company will increase the salary'. He eventually became friends with another Bangladeshi worker who had been with the firm for 30 years and trained him on the job. Aktar finally started earning the 950 Riyals that he had been promised after a couple of years. Nevertheless, his situation remained precarious – the company suddenly stopped paying the workers when it ran into difficulties. Aktar was able to fall back on his uncle, who lived in Qatar – without family support, migrants would be highly vulnerable in such a situation. After receiving no pay for four months, Aktar decided to leave the company because he had savings that he could use to buy a free visa. His uncle found a company through his contacts that was selling a free visa for 10,000 Riyals and a new ID card for another QAR 2,400. When asked why he would spend so much on this type of visa even though it is illegal, he talked about the benefits:

The benefit is the freedom. Companies (and tied visas) have rules that one must work for eight hours with an additional three hours' overtime. You also need to do

what and whenever your company tells you to do. We (those with free visas) don't work all the time. We work only eight hours. People like us who work on a free visa have work of different types. We work and take rest as well. We eat at home morning and evening. My future plan is to get a job. A permanent job. I mean a government job. I can go to a bigger post from that position.

Thus, a year after arriving in Qatar, Aktar felt like a free man and was dreaming of a well-paid 9–5 office job. He intended to approach a broker in Qatar to try to find a permanent job: 'Yes. I can't get the job without brokers. I will also need money. But I will also get many advantages. I will get a fixed amount, five days' office a week, eight hours' duty.

The contrast between the humanitarian and migrant welfare discourse and migrants' own accounts are very evident here. In the first discourse, Aktar's situation – being subjected to contract substitution and irregular pay – would have been viewed as extreme exploitation that would limit his ability to break out of poverty or debt. While Aktar did face hardship, he was able to overcome it through family support and by accumulating savings that would eventually put him on a stronger upward trajectory.

It is clear that this type of migration is bringing about a transformation in the overall prosperity level in Chapai. For some this has led to the building of better houses and the purchase of land while, for others, migration to Qatar has served as a stepping-stone towards longer-distance and 'better' destinations in Asia and Europe. In the words of one local *dalal*:

Labour migration has changed the face of Chapai. The whole area has developed. Buildings have replaced tin houses. In Chapai town, for example, a migrant has built a six-storey mansion with a lift. In my village alone, you find 30 buildings which are built by migrants. These houses have electricity and running water. They have made *bigha* after *bigha* land property. Now, current generations of earlier migrants, they no longer go to the Middle East for construction or similar jobs. They are going to Korea or Europe. People are learning Korean, getting trained in a certain trade and then going to Korea for factory jobs. Many people are also going Italy. There is also an expansion of higher education. You will find increasing numbers of young people from Chapai pursuing higher education and establishing themselves in white-collar public and private jobs.

## **Outcomes**

The interviews with migrants show their ambivalent feelings about recruitment – a mixture of annoyance at being cheated, worries about not being able to repay loans as fast as they planned to, relief at getting a job and gratitude that the *dalal* had kept his word and got them into their desired destination. On balance the objective of arriving in a foreign country where they see many possibilities is paramount and appeared to outweigh any concerns they had about working conditions and the deviation between promises and the reality of employment. In a context where foreign countries and their companies, the Bangladeshi border control agencies and formal institutions in Dhaka and rural societies are separated by insurmountable social and cultural divides, the role of the broker who can transcend these different worlds becomes critical. The broker is not only someone who makes the journey materially possible

through the arrangement of the necessary documentation, financial transactions and journeys, he is also someone who is a cultural broker for the migrant.

Had the migrant attempted to complete these official procedures on his own, the process would have been frustrating, expensive and time-consuming because so many require insider knowledge of whom to approach to speed things up and who can be bribed to complete tasks. The efficiency of the network of recruiters must be appreciated: they can perform the complex task of recruiting workers from rural areas, shepherding them through complex and unfriendly procedures involving the filling out of forms, undergoing medical checks, obtaining certificates and delivering them to the airport with all conditions fulfilled. While the Bangladeshi regime and many others like it have tried hard to do away with brokers, these latter continue to proliferate and flourish simply because an effective substitute for their services has not been and arguably may never be found in the foreseeable future.

The *dalals* will offer the migrant a complete ‘package’ – helping them with obtaining a passport, checking that the visa is authentic, helping them to make all the necessary arrangements and handing them over to the sub-broker. If the person is migrating through an official channel, i.e. applying for a job that matches his visa, then the *dalal* will usually hand him over to the sub-agent in the nearest town or city, who will then help the migrant to complete the official procedures for BMET. Where the migration is irregular – as we saw in the case of Aktar – the village-level *dalal* handles everything and actively prevents contact with the official machinery.

What is plain is that even seemingly official routes are riddled with unofficial visa trading, fees and bribes. Given the difficulties of navigating this quagmire, it becomes easy to understand why the familiar face of the village *dalal*, who says he can manage all of these people, is trusted.

Nevertheless, our two cases also show that, unlike in closed traditional societies where moral contracts enshrined in patron–client relationships are enforceable through culturally understood codes of reciprocity, duty and honour, the accountability of brokers to the migrant may become more diluted as he moves further up the recruitment chain. This dilution of accountability can result in a less-than-perfect outcome in terms of differences in promised wages, contracts, working conditions and jobs. Those discrepancies notwithstanding, the migrants whom we interviewed felt that, on balance, they and their families had fared better because of their decision to migrate. The research shows that migrants are aware of the risks of migration through informal brokers but that they prefer to take them because they can draw on the moral contract and call in the support of their kinship network should anything go wrong. It is also evident that certain costs and risks are deemed to be acceptable by migrants, whereas others are not, and these emic interpretations of costs and risks are important for a grounded understanding of why migrants embark on such journeys.

## Notes

1. The Migrating out of Poverty–RMMRU Global Quantitative Survey was conducted in 2013 and covered 1,200 internal, international and non-migrant households (see

- Litchfield *et al.* 2015). The SDC and RMMRU survey on migration was conducted in 2013–2014 and covered 5,084 households in all three categories.
2. There is huge variation in costs even between registered agencies in Bangladesh. Research done by Jureidini (2014) shows that workers are charged a commission, airfare, government taxes, Qatar embassy fees, medical tests, skills tests, passport, airport tax and sub-agent fees and the total could be anything from \$600 to \$1,200.
  3. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), there were 1,089 recruiting agencies in Bangladesh in 2016 (<http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/raHomeAction>). A survey by Gardner *et al.* (2013) of low-income workers in Qatar showed that 64.2 per cent were recruited through a private agency.
  4. We use the masculine to refer to all brokers in this paper as we did not encounter any female brokers and the literature on brokerage in Bangladesh also suggests that this is a male-dominated profession.
  5. A micro study conducted in migration intensity areas has shown that most of the migrants were young (15–30 years) when they first migrated (Siddiqui and Abrar 2002).
  6. Mohammad’s family owns a small mango orchard that does not provide year-round income for the household.

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## About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

**Migrating out of Poverty** is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions – and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of **Migrating out of Poverty** is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and their countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world-renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The **Migrating out of Poverty** consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters, with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

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