Bangladeshi Migrants in Malaysia

That single hope, to change one’s destiny, is what ties all migrants together, whether they be the Bangladeshis who work in the forests of Malaysia, who work as unskilled labour in the Middle East, or those who go to the promised lands of the US. Not all of them are poor. Many are skilled and well educated. Still, the possibility of changing one’s destiny is the single driving force that pushes people into precarious journeys all across the globe. They see it not merely as a means for economic freedom, but also as a means for social mobility.

The book undertakes a holistic view of the migration of Bangladeshis to Malaysia. It attempts to create a better understanding of the complex issues surrounding migration, and looks pragmatically at integration and re-integration. It analyses the social, economic, legal and cultural environments under which migration takes place.
THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE

BANGLADESHI MIGRANTS IN MALAYSIA

PHOTOGRAPHS AND WORDS

SHAHIDUL ALAM
The Best Years of My Life
Bangladeshi Migrants in Malaysia
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Cover Photo
Bangladeshi migrants waiting to board flight to Kuala Lumpur
Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka
SDC – The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The overall goal of Switzerland’s development cooperation is that of reducing poverty. It is meant to foster economic self-reliance and state autonomy, to contribute to the improvement of production conditions, to help in finding solutions to environmental problems, and to provide better access to education and basic healthcare services.

The Global Programme Migration and Development is the Division within SDC that helps leverage the potential of migration for development. It engages in regional and global political dialogue, implements specific innovative projects in the field of “Migration and Development,” supports the implementation of a coherent Swiss migration policy and promotes the development perspective therein.

Drik Picture Library Ltd.

Drik is an independent media organisation committed to challenging social inequality. Established in 1989 in Bangladesh, it specialises in providing state of the art media and communication products for a local and global audience. Known for its creativity and innovation, this award winning agency gave rise to the world renowned photography school, Pathshala; Majority World, a ‘fair trade’ photo agency which counters western domination in visual media, and the best known photo festival in Asia, Chobi Mela, a role model that subsequent festivals in China, India, Singapore and other Asian countries have been built on. It also introduced email to Bangladesh.

Drik Images is a platform for indigenous storytellers. The griots of the east. Establishing its own identity through images and words, it defies the stereotypes that western media has created and is a vibrant source of creative energy that refuses to be cowed down.
DEDICATION

To the Bangladeshi women and men who have gone overseas, giving of themselves to create a better life for others.
A very large team spread over Bangladesh, Switzerland and Malaysia have worked feverishly to make this book happen. Besides the people featured in the book, who have so generously allowed me into their lives, this publication is indebted to Arul Das, Badal Khan, Gautam Roy, Marina Mahathir, Mohammad Borhan Uddin Khan, Md. Harunur Rashid, Mostafa Imran Razu, Nazir Sufari, Sufi Yusof and Wairah M arzuki, in Malaysia; ASM Rezaur Rahman, Md. Jasimuddin Talukder, Mohammad Atiqur Rahman, Md. Mosarof Hossain (Azad), Mohammad Riaz Hamidullah, Sadia M arium, Saleh Ahmed and Tasmin Haque Tulin in Bangladesh, and Anindya Dutta, Shabarinath Nair and Stefan Christoph Bigler in Switzerland.

Two special people who endured more pain than most, my co-researcher Saydia Gulrukh, and my partner Rahnuma Ahmed, will forever be my inspiration.
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For millions of people migration is an individual livelihood strategy to improve the lives of their families which ultimately contributes to poverty reduction, inclusive growth and sustainable development both in countries of origin and countries of destination worldwide. This publication provides a reflection on the journey undertaken by Bangladeshi migrant workers in search of a better future for themselves and their families. Their journeys involve separation from loved ones and hard work. They are filled with numerous stories of success and failure, hope and despair.

Focusing on individual stories and a particular migration corridor between Bangladesh and Malaysia allows putting a human face to migration, which is often understood only by numbers. It also lets us gain a deeper understanding of the various facets of migration and the realities that migrant workers are faced with every day. The publication finds a fine line between highlighting the positive aspects of migration and at the same time depicting its challenges. The featured stories bring to light the hardships undertaken by migrants in their journey as well as their aspirations to provide a better future for their loved ones, often at a cost to themselves. One message is clear: migrants are courageous people with resources and they are willing to take their destiny into their own hands. By focusing on a handful of individual stories, this publication tries to do justice in reflecting the aspirations of over 250 million international migrants worldwide.

Switzerland has been working on Migration and Development for over a decade by shaping the international policy dialogue and by supporting concrete projects on the ground. In partnering with all relevant stakeholders, it is engaged at all levels to promote the key role of migration and development in a globalised and mobile world.

The Best Years of My Life includes this book and an exhibition at the Global Forum on Migration and Development in Dhaka in December 2016 and makes migration and development visible. We are very pleased to partner on this project with Drik and the Government of Bangladesh.

Markus Reisle
Head of the Global Program Migration and Development
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Aeroflot was cheap. They also offered a stopover in Moscow. The second option wasn’t so important to the others on my flight. I had seen the young men, some in uniform, strutting through the airport lounge. The glitzy interior was different from any other place they had encountered. They sat in the same seats that middle class passengers sat in. They wore new sneakers. Had fresh haircuts. Even with numbers stuck on, they looked a smart bunch. Well before we’d taken off, they were in cloud nine. This flight was to be a life-changing experience, and they were going to live every moment of it. You didn’t have so much security in those days and boarding a flight was a relatively simple affair. It was when they were about to board that they realised what they were leaving behind.

The families had come over from the villages to see them off. They’d slept outside the airport. At night they’d prayed together. At the small opening in the ramp before boarding the plane, they stopped. They were too far away from each other to be recognisable. But this was when they realised it was goodbye time. They waved and they waved and they waved to the small figures in the distant horizon. Each side believing the other was waving back. It was familiar for the ground crew, who tried to rustle them in, but it was no easy affair. That last look, for some perhaps the very last look, was not to be rushed.

Abdul Malek sat next to me. He was from a small village not far from Goalondo. He had few illusions. Even if he received what the dalal (manpower agent) had promised, the $118 a month for eighteen months, would not be enough to repay the loans his family had taken to get him to Tripoli. But he saw it differently. This trip he felt could be a life-changer. An opportunity to work his way out of a life that had so far offered little. The social mobility that the well-to-do accepted as natural, was a transformation the poor were denied. Left to themselves, they would die, the way they were born. Poor.

Migration offered an opportunity to change their lives. It was risky, uncertain and certainly hard, but it was a risk they were prepared to take. The
absence of choice, made the choice simple. Abdul Malek had dreams that his sister would get married, his father would buy a plot of land, maybe he’d set up a shop when he went back. They were distant dreams, but dreams he wasn’t prepared to let go.

It was that chance conversation that set me off to follow his journey and that of others. I’ve photographed migrants, mostly from Bangladesh, in Bahrain, France, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Lebanon, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, UAE, UK and the USA. It was largely through piggy-backing on other assignments I had, taking a few extra days, when time allowed. The Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD) allowed an opportunity to explore it to a depth, I had never had the chance before.

Travelling with migrants from Dhaka to Kuala Lumpur, following them in Malaysia, from the palm fields in Johor Bahru to the mass graves in Perlis. I visited their homes, and shared home-cooked food. I visited their families back in Bangladesh. Through in-depth interviews and meetings with a full range of players along the value chain, I tried to understand what created the pull and the thrust that made their migration, their exploitation, and their occasional prosperity, a possibility.

Migration is a complex phenomenon, and each story is different, but by observing it close up, from so many different perspectives, has allowed me to go beyond the quantitative world of statistics and numbers, and see the more human aspect of fears, perceptions and hopes.

In the end, each one of us is a migrant of sorts. It is only when the migrant stops being the other, and we embrace the reality of migration, taking on board all the joys and trepidations that they face, that we shall build the open society, that beckons us. It is as much about facing our own fears and prejudices. About letting go of our internal demons. About accepting that agency and ambition, so celebrated in the West, is a common attribute. It is about believing that this planet is for us all. For us and our children’s children, to be shared to the full.
Waiting for their loved ones. Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka.
The flat was deceptive, and I would never have made my way upstairs had Dudu Bhai, the Bangladeshi shop owner downstairs, not suggested that I take a look, and sent a young man to guide me. It was midway between Gare du Nord and Gare de L’Est. Knowing they might be suspicious, he had sent over a trusted deputy to introduce me.

They had reasons to be cagey. French law would surely not have allowed such living conditions. The bunk beds cramped into the small room allowed little space for manoeuvre. Ali Hossain collected the roses from the bucket in the bathroom and sprinkled water on them before heading out. He didn’t mind the job, or that his bed was shared with others who took turns to sleep in it. It wasn’t a bad job, unless it rained, or he was chased by the police. It was the loss of his youth that bothered him. That he was giving away the best years of his life, to secure a future for his family. He didn’t bear a grudge, but it hurt.

That single hope, to change one’s destiny, is what ties all migrants together whether they be the Bangladeshis who work in the forests of Malaysia, who work as unskilled labour in the Middle East, or those who go to the promised lands of the US. Not all of them are poor. Many are skilled and well-educated. Still, the possibility of changing one’s destiny is the single driving force that pushes people into precarious journeys all across the globe. They see it not merely as a means for economic freedom, but also as a means for social mobility.
Bringing up six children for a single mother in rural Bangladesh had not been easy. Abul Hossain’s mother Nurjahan Begum did not know how to read or write and was too old to move into the garment or construction industries. So she worked as a household help and saved what she could, but was determined to provide for her children. The elder sons Md. Babul Mia and Abul had not studied much either,
but Babul was in Malaysia, and Abul, having had a painful experience in the Maldives, was looking for better options. The same dalal who had taken him to the Maldives, promised things would be better in Malaysia. Two years after working in Malaysia he came home to get married. I visited him in Comilla before he went back to Malaysia. Nurjahan liked to have her sons with her, but was aware of the realities. They would send money home, she would get some respite for her aching body. It was a shared dream. His wife Amena Akter, felt differently. She appreciated that the money helped, but knew the work was dangerous and worried about him. She would rather they do with less, but be together.
Nurjahan Begum, her son Abul Hossain and his wife Amena Akter in Comilla
Abul Hossain’s nephew Ratul, whom his father has never seen

Babul Mia’s wife Halima Akter and Abul Hossain’s wife Amena Akter in their kitchen
Mamun had been desperate to leave his job as a fruit seller in the shop at Mirpur Road in Dhaka. A dalal had promised him a job in Malaysia. He was uncertain. “It’s tomorrow,” he blurted out on the phone one day. The dalal had told him to be at the airport at noon. The flight wasn’t until the evening, but ‘arrangements’ needed to be made.

THE JOURNEY

Migrants at Kuala Lumpur airport being taken to a separate room
He looked very different at the airport. The mop of shaggy hair had morphed into a Pompadour hairstyle. The new sneakers and rucksack would probably have suited a teenager better, but it was almost part of the uniform. I saw other young men, with similar haircuts and near-identical shoes. The look obviously went with the dream. Mamun’s family had come to the airport to see him off. There were long goodbyes, and a lot of hugging. His was an all-male affair, though women were saying goodbye to others.
Migrant workers were effectively the main sponsors of Shahjalal International Airport, though this was hardly reflected in the treatment Mamun and his co-workers received at the hands of officials at check-in, immigration, and both the ground and air crew. Mamun shrugged it off. He was travelling on a ‘professional visa’ reserved for people with specialised skills. It had been ‘arranged’ and he didn’t want to attract attention. Mustafizur Rahman, a young Bangladeshi businessman who had himself been in Mamun’s shoes, looked at his contract. “It says 1500, but you will get 900,” he said knowingly. Mamun could not read the document he was carrying. Neither had he been able to read the contract he had signed. He sensed things wouldn’t be quite what was promised, but was prepared to make the trip anyway. Dreams had a price.
As everywhere else, there were kind people and those who took you for a ride. First-timers were particularly vulnerable. Though we travelled together on the plane, once at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Mamun and I were separated as the migrants (they were easy to spot) were taken to another room. That’s when I lost contact with Mamun. He rang me several days later. His phone had been taken away in the detention room and they had wanted more money. Once money was sent from Bangladesh he was released. Since then Mamun had moved from job to job, in Nilai, then Johor Bahru, eventually in Kuala Lumpur. But his passport and money had been stolen by another Bangladeshi. The man has since contacted him from Bangladesh, saying the passport would be returned if he paid twenty thousand taka (Bangladeshi currency).
It was not easy for Abul to see me. Things had been difficult since arriving in Malaysia. He had moved from job to job and had not been paid for the last three months. He was living on borrowed money. The only time we could find was late at night, once he finished work.

Virtually all Bangladeshis in Malaysia used Whatsapp, and telecom companies had special deals targeting migrant workers, which included using migrant salesmen who sold SIM cards on the streets of Bengali Market, near Chinatown. Bangladeshi posters all across the city advertised special deals with low rates for calling home.

Abul was waiting for me in the street corner. We walked over to the block of flats where they lived. While the room was bare, it was better living conditions than most Bangladeshi migrants found themselves in. A toddler from the family of Indonesian workers who lived in the adjoining room liked hanging around, and livened up the place, giving it a sense of home.
Theirs was the solidarity of co-sufferers. He introduced me to his fellow construction workers in Ampang. It wasn’t just that they were roommates, they’d been arrested together by Malaysian police. Abul had a valid passport. His friend did not. They both paid, to keep peace with the police. It had been hard-earned money, but they were happy to be out of jail. Happy to be earning. Theirs was the solidarity of co-sufferers. A strong bond.
As I photographed the compound, Abul mused about how good I had made it look. “If you send them [his family] this photo, they’ll never believe the conditions we live in,” he wryly commented. They would never believe him even if he’d sent them pictures of their hardship. The persecution, the fear, the brutality.

“Bidesh” (abroad) had a lure, established by colonisers and generations of manpower agents. The promises made, and the need to believe, was a powerful cocktail. The pull was too strong. Those who had made it flaunted their wealth, making bidesh all the more enticing.
As is the practice in every Bangladeshi home, a visitor could not leave without having a meal. I felt embarrassed at having arrived empty-handed. It was a special meal for boro bhai (elder brother). Cooked at the end of a strenuous day in a construction site and before a much-needed sleep ahead of the renewed grind in the morning, it was a generosity alien to my middle class upbringing. There were no tables, chairs or beds, so we spread newspapers on the floor. Hot delicious bhat (rice), dal (lentil) and mangsho (meat) were served directly from the pot. What a change it was from hotel food.

We walked over to the construction site. Access was easier at night, in the absence of the foreman. The security guards were comrades of sorts and a boro bhai from home, could hardly be denied access. Still we didn’t stay too long. He had been lucky to find this job and didn’t want to risk upsetting the boss in any way.

The goodbyes were sad, like any family parting is. They all walked me to the market place where I could find a taxi. I promised to return, knowing how unlikely that was, not so much because Malaysia was far away, but because their existence was so fragile. There was no knowing where they would find themselves. What lay in the future, a better job, jail, maybe even deportation, was something none of us could predict. Abul rang me when I got back to the hotel, to make sure I’d arrived safely. He also needed a favour. He had saved 200 ringgit (Malaysian currency). Could I take it back for his mum? And a mobile phone for the family? He would drop them off to the hotel.

The neatly wrapped package was dropped off at the hotel the next day and Abul’s younger brother Kamal Hossain, came over to pick it up. I felt blessed that I had in some way, been part of this loving chain. Abul rang me the other day, to say he hadn’t been paid for three months.
Cameron Highlands was a popular tourist spot. Switzerland of the east. The new five star hotels and the casinos, budget motels and good cheap street food attracted backpackers and millionaires. Malaysia is one of the few Muslim countries where mini skirts and hot pants coexist with hijabs and burkhas. Alcohol and halal food were served at the same table. Budget tourists with backpacks squeezed past Maseratis. While the tea gardens were a tourist attraction, few of the visitors knew what was under the bonnet in the plantations.

Md. (Mohammad) Belal Mahmud took me to the plantation. He was one of the lucky ones. He had been an undocumented worker himself and had felt the weight of authority. He had not forgotten his roots, and while he had come to better times, he maintained contact with his less fortunate friends.
For Masud Rana and his friends, the plantations in Cameron Highlands was Malaysia. Transported straight from the airport to the fields, their ‘overseas’ residency consisted of the makeshift shacks they lived in, and the fields where they worked. Too poor to go home, they did all the work locals would not touch, and stayed, hoping to recover the money they had paid the dalal, the police, and the many other parasites that lived off migrant workers. “There is only one law here,” said Masud. “The word of the owner.” That simple rule dictated their lifestyle. Obey and stay out of trouble was the simple mantra.

Masud Rana was from Bogra, his uncle Abu Taher from Joypurhat. The cool breeze that attracted the tourists made it seem like the middle of winter to Bangladeshis. They used blankets throughout the year and bathing in the spring waters was less of a luxury than others perceived. They allowed themselves 150 ringgit a month for food. Roughly a dollar a day. Luckily the plantation provided vegetables. Abdul Jalal Miah had been warming himself by burning waste outside his hut, but eventually went inside to escape the chill.
A pin-up of an attractive western woman, stuck against the plywood wall, was one of the few entertainments they had on offer. The landscape was beautiful, and the wild orange blossoms scattered around the hillsides stood out from the deep green. It was the beauty of this landscape that dalals used to entice workers to the plantations. That, plus the promise of riches. It wasn’t that Masud was unappreciative of beauty. It’s just that twelve-hour working days, and cooking, washing and other essential errands, left little room for either contemplation or for admiring the landscape.

150 ringgit a month for food
Like ants furrying up the hillsides

The workers, draped in white polythene capes, like ants furrying up the hillsides, were speckles on the verdant hills. Two leaves and a bud, precisely plucked, led to the perfect brew for an afternoon tea. The dirty, dangerous and demeaning labour put in by the migrants, work that locals were not prepared to do, never made it to the adverts.
Home of Masud Rana and other Bangladeshi workers in Cameron Highlands
Home of Malaysian workers in Cameron Highlands

Masud Rana spraying pesticide, Cameron Highlands

Masud Rana (left), his uncle Abu Taher and child worker
Md. Nazrul Islam is from Faridpur. He came to Malaysia nine years ago. “I paid 200,000 [to the dalal] and kept getting the runaround from the office in Dhaka for 18 months. Finally I was given a calling [visa]. I’d been told I’d get a good job in a toy factory with a basic of 35,000 taka. If I worked Sundays, I’d get overtime at double rates. I ended up in a glove company. Not all the work was good, some of it tough, but I managed. Many from our group left, they used to cry as they couldn’t put up with the conditions. The food was really bad. Our sleeping arrangements were bad too. I stuck it out for four years. Then Malaysia created an opportunity to regularise us. This allowed us to change jobs. I then fled and left the company, but many others who tried were beaten up and tortured. Their money was withheld, their phones snatched. That had happened to me too. They took my two phones and didn’t pay my salary. I worked for six weeks in very tough conditions in the palm fields. Never got paid. But then a local Bangladeshi who had settled here and

Many ended up in jail. Some went back home
married a Malaysian, helped me get papers. I joined him. Many of the others had given money to dalals for visas. They got duped. They are illegal now. Many ended up in jail. Some returned to Bangladesh. People have dreams. They hope to make some money. Not everyone is from a good home, many are from poor families. This is how we are in Malaysia. Some are getting caught, some are leaving, some are without papers. And the tax, they take a lot of tax. I myself had to pay four thousand ringgit a year. How shall we pay so much tax? Even when we want to go home, they eat up a lot of money. I was lucky. My boss would renew my visa. I went once to the High Commission in 2011 to get finger [printed]. Even then my boss helped. I want to go back, but how can I? I’m still in poverty. My mother is back home. She is sick. She wants me to come back, to get married. But if I think about the family, about getting my brothers established,... it’s been a long time, nine years. But I don’t really see a future back home, I’ll have to come back again.
“I had set up the fruit shop at Pudu Sentral when it was a bustling bus station. Thousands of passengers used to mill around every day. Business was brisk. Then the bus station moved away and soon the people were gone.”

Nazrul spent long hours at his stall waiting for customers. When things were good, he had hired a household help for his mother. Now that seemed a distant luxury. Still he had a business and a genuine passport. It provided a sense of relief.

According to the website, “Strategically located within Bukit Bintang, the heart of Kuala Lumpur’s city centre, Sunbow Hotel & Residency is a modern boutique hotel offering luxurious Comfort.” The reality for Nazrul and his friends was somewhat different.

Nazrul and three other workers pay 750 ringgit and share bunk beds in a room in Sunway Residencies. Workers from Indonesia and the Philippines share other rooms. Nazrul was at work the day the police raided Sunway. Three men and a woman reportedly
Workers pay 750 ringgit a month for a shared room.

...died as they jumped from the high-rise building in an effort to escape. Bribes to the police are sometimes lower for those who are legal. Since owners often hang on to their passports, workers cannot produce them even if they are documented and need the owners to get them out if arrested.

Arriving migrants are easy to spot. They get separated out upon arrival at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Negotiations then take place. Desperate phone calls home ask for extra money. Lucky ones get released once the right money goes to the right hands. Others either end up in jail or are sent back home.

Nazrul and his friends however, have no regrets. They feel they have done well, despite the hardship. And while they hope their experience, if made known to others, will help prevent exploitation, they are not bitter about life in Malaysia. Their migrant lives have brought about transformations to their families back home, and while they recognise they were wronged, the price they feel was worth paying.
THE POET

Babu Biswas is a moira (maker of traditional sweets) at Bismillah Store in Bengali Market in Kuala Lumpur. It was at a quiet moment, when he was reflecting on his life that I discovered he was a poet.

The black earth of Kuantan
Scraggy scrubs abound
When dark descended at twilight
Cricket sounds I found

“I have always been poor. My father was a farmer. While I was in class eight, my teacher expelled me from school as I had not paid my tuition fees. That was when dad sent me to work in a mishti [sweet made from curd] store in a nearby town. I used to get thirty taka a month [not much more than a dollar]. But gradually it went up to 300 taka a month. I later left the job and set up a mishti shop of my own. Slowly, I began to take care of my
parents, my brothers and sisters, my entire family. I got into debt and couldn’t hang on to the shop. That’s when I enlisted to go abroad, deposited the money. The dalal ran off with my money. I ran after him for two-three years, chasing him in Chittagong, Dhaka, eventually, with the help of the local administration, I was able to corner him and he got me to Malaysia via Singapore. There I was kept captive, and they tried to entice me into paying more money. Anyway, I managed to escape and eventually got this job. I’ve been here now for ten years. Have been back home three times. Seen my children. They are doing well.

“I get up at seven, bathe and start work. Work ends at eight. Then I bathe, eat and fall asleep, only to start again at seven. On Eid [important religious holiday celebrated by Muslims; Babu, himself is Hindu] days I get two hours off, otherwise this is my life. Perhaps I’ll go back someday. My children are studying; I’ll look after them. Workers are never valued. That’s how it has always been. Those who have money, they are the ones who stay on top. I had a job in Kuantan, after two-three months, when I asked for my salary, the boss feigned bankruptcy. He did give me some money which I used to buy some rice and lentils, but mostly I lived off leaves and vines scavenged from the plantations.”
Life is tough for single mothers anywhere. For rural Bangladeshis it is especially so. But the economic independence and the freedom that migration offers, is not something women easily find at home. Migration has allowed Sahanaz Parben to place her son in an elite cadet college, normally the domain of the well-to-do. She’s bought property in Bangladesh, and when she goes back she hopes to set up on her own.

There is regret too. She left her son with her sister. Now that he is eleven, he calls Sahanaz’s sister ‘mother,’ while she herself is ‘aunty.’ Not being called mother by her own son, is something that torments Sahanaz. It was her son she was doing it for. Not being called ‘mother’ is a price mothers sometimes have to pay.

“Not being called ‘mother’ by her own son torments Sahanaz."

“The largest manufacturer of rubber gloves in the world” states the Top Glove website. They employ many women, often from Bangladesh. The women, who stay in a hostel, have strict restrictions. Visitors are not allowed and industrial police patrol the
factory area. We stopped to ask where the factory was. Immediately afterwards, police stopped us and wanted to see our passports. Sahanaz works twelve hours a day, but is happy with the work conditions.

The company deducted 1800 ringgit from her pay, when she joined claiming it was owed to the dalal, though she had paid him in full. She was never given a copy of the documents she signed.
Razia Sultana also worked at Top Glove, but lost her job and went back home. She is back in Malaysia, where she has set up her own tailor shop in Klang. Her husband Nuruddin, runs a grocery shop nearby.
I had flown in on the morning of Eid-ul-Fitr, hoping to see how Bangladeshi migrant workers celebrated Eid, to share some of the lighter moments. Dropping off my luggage at the hotel, I headed off to Masjid Nagar, where I thought they would gather. Some Bangladeshi workers were there. A few even wore new clothes. Most of them had merely taken time off and were going to return to work after prayers. I saw some of them later in the day, at a construction site in Bukit Bintang. Stopping on the way to work to watch a game of cricket at a roadside restaurant, or gathering outside Green Leaves restaurant near Titiwangsa Light Rapid Transit (LRT) for a game of chess at night were the few distractions they permitted themselves.

Few places can compete with the quality of roadside food in South East Asia. Monjur approached me, as I sat with foreign friends at a roadside restaurant. He thought I was foreign too, and tried to sell me carved wooden fruit bowls. He was taken aback when I spoke to him in Bangla, but was happy to give me an interview. I also got a big discount on the fruit bowls! “I have done well, he said. With nine chops [stamp on passport], no one can bother me. I have sent somewhere between 20-40 lakh [hundred thousand] takas home. Built a house. But you are the first person in nine years, who has treated me with respect.”
**TOP**: Bangladeshi workers at construction site in Bukit Bintang on Eid day, 6 July 2016

**MIDDLE**: Bangladeshi workers watching their national team playing cricket, outside roadside café in Pudu

**BOTTOM**: Bangladeshi workers playing chess outside Green Leaves restaurant at Titiwangsa
Multinational companies recognise the buying power of migrants. Pran, a successful Bangladeshi beverage company, has made inroads into many South Asian and South East Asian countries. While well-to-do Bangladeshis and even many civil society activists, might not have made it to the remote interiors of the palm fields, the Pran trucks find their way to these distant customers. There were relatively few women amongst Bangladeshi migrants, but they too were consumers. Bangladeshi shops were well-stocked with Fair and Lovely whitening cosmetics, highlighting a racist preference for white skin, South Asians have not been able to overcome. Teenage girls prettied up for a Bangladeshi social gathering in Hotel Soleil at Bukit Bintang. Pale skin, heavy makeup and tight fitting jeans providing the ‘western’ look.
Pran delivery truck in palm plantation near Johor Bahru
Md. Belal Hossain at Cameron Highlands

LIVING THE DREAM

Md. Belal Mahmud was happy that I too was from Faridpur district. He had come over in 2000 on a ‘calling’ visa through a dalal, having paid 120,000 taka (equivalent to 4,00,000 now according to Belal). “My father sold his land, so at least we didn’t have to pay interest. But even then it took me two years to recover the money. The dalal never kept his promise. He put me in a plantation. I had no experience in this type of work.”
The owner wasn’t good, and didn’t pay regularly, so I escaped. Then slowly with the help of other Bangladeshis, I was able to get work in the construction sector. He became undocumented, due to the mismanagement of his employer and remained so for seven years until he went back home in 2007. He returned to Cameron Highlands in 2009 to work in the plantations but moved to home construction. A free agent now, he takes on construction contracts of his own, his ‘freedom’ being arranged through the cooperation of his employer. Belal’s brother had also been in Malaysia, working in plantations. After five years, when he still couldn’t get his documents regularised, he went back. His health was failing.

“If I were to advise people today, I’d say don’t come unless the government has worked out a mechanism. Don’t come through dalals and don’t come unless your paperwork is fully in order. They must never come on a tourist or student visa, or by boat. We saw yesterday an 8-year-old boy who has come over on a tourist visa with his family. He’s been dumped in the plantation and getting 400 ringgit a month. You saw this with your own eyes. This was just one garden, if you look you will find thousands. How many Bangladeshis are there in Indonesia, say 2000? There are around a million Bangladeshis in Malaysia. You can’t have the same number of people serving a million as you have for 2000. Only when you have a [embassy] staff commensurate with the number of workers can you serve the workers properly.
“It takes 7-8 hours to go to Kuala Lumpur from here and another 7-8 hours to get back. So it’s very difficult to get things done at the High Commission. I had suggested that there be a sub office, if only to handle passports in this region. They did hear me out, but nothing’s happened so far.

“The Bangladeshis here are hard-working. They don’t expect much, but a little encouragement would go a long way. They are far from their homes, their families, their loved ones. Even if they be illegal, the money they send home is making a difference. If they are illegal, they can’t even go home. If they get ill, there is no way to treat them. The farmers who work here, have to use pesticides every day. So they are always in a health hazard. Sometimes the owner makes a mistake. They themselves aren’t very aware of health issues. For instance, they don’t use masks properly, I don’t know how useful the masks are anyway. If the government arranged a mobile health team it would make a big difference. The local system isn’t of use to these workers. It takes 50 ringgit just to register yourself, the medicine is another matter.

“They send money home, and their families prosper, but they get frustrated when they return. They are often unemployed. They don’t have the capital to set up their own business. If the government could provide a small loan or an employment opportunity for returnee migrants, it would make a huge difference. They would then have a future.”
Md. Shaheen Sardar had distinct career plans when he went to Malaysia. He had heard it was a land of opportunity. It was also a chance for learning good English, which would help his career. He paid for the college fees by selling his mother’s goat!

He paid for his studies by working in his spare time, and had neither a fixed address, nor a fixed income. It was a lonely existence. When ill, he reflected on the meaning of his life, away from loved ones. He wondered if anyone would know if he died. Meeting the Chinese owner of IGC - Industrial Galvanizers Corporation (M) SDN BHD
Corporation (M) SDN BHD, one of the leading galvanising factories in Malaysia, by accident, Shaheen was able to convince the owner that he was a potential asset. Shaheen climbed up the ranks through hard work, initiative and dedication. Now, the Senior General Manager of the company, he has brought in over 500 Bangladeshis to his factory in Nilai.

Shaheen has never forgotten his roots. Unlike many a manager in class-conscious Bangladesh, he is regularly on the beat. More comfortable in jeans than in a suit and tie, he still leads from the front, staying with his crew when times get rough. When there is a problem to be solved, it is Shaheen who is down on the boiler floor, spanner in hand.

He is also involved in social work and when a worker dies, arranges to raise money for the funeral and for sending the body home to Bangladesh. He insists on his workers getting well-paid, and on safe working conditions in the factory floor.
He had distinct career plans.
It was romance that took AH Rashid (Harun) to Malaysia. He went to Singapore in March 1981 as an apprentice on Jurong shipyard. That’s when he fell in love with the sister of the Chinese chief engineer. His future brother-in-law didn’t approve of the marriage, since it involved his sister converting to Islam. He eventually relented, but instructed them to settle in his own home country Malaysia, where being Muslim wouldn’t be a problem for his sister, a Chinese woman. The couple moved to Malaysia and got married in June 1984. Harun eventually got a job in Penang, but was having trouble with immigration. He took the bold step of approaching the founder of Malaysia, to ask for his help. Tunku Abdul Rahman had written a letter recommending that Harun be given a work permit.

In 1998 Harun became an enlisted contractor in Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), the largest electricity utility in Malaysia. Semi-retired, he still has some trading with Japan, China, Brunei and Korea, but is unable to take on contractual jobs as he cannot hire
skilled workers from Bangladesh, due to the current freeze on Bangladeshi workers. A devout Muslim who believes in philanthropy, Harun goes to Bangladesh every Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. He had brought in 51 Bangladeshi workers at his own cost. They worked for him for four years before returning in 2011. Harun is one of the guardians of the Benggali [sic] Mosque, which was inaugurated by Tunku Abdul Rahman. Sometime back when some people wanted the name of the mosque to be changed, Haroon resisted with the help of the Bangladesh High Commissioner, Farooq Sobhan. “They won’t be able to do it now,” he laughs. His daughter is a rising lawyer and has pledged to defend the mosque. Harun’s children love spending time with their grandparents in his home town in Khulna.

“Bangladeshis have played a vital role in the development of Malaysia. Even the Royal Palace has been built by Bangladeshis. But Bangladeshis who come over as migrant workers must come at zero cost. Malaysians spend over 10,000 ringgit to bring
over an Indonesian maid, yet when Bangladeshis come to Malaysia, they end up paying 10,000 to 12,000 ringgit to the middlemen, who are wealthy and established. They are selling humans. There are workers from many nations here. None of them need to spend money to come. Only Bangladeshis need to pay to come here. But I must congratulate the Bangladesh government for having established the G2G [government to government] programme. Even if Bangladeshi migrants don’t ever make it to Malaysia, I hope that the G2G system remains. These middlemen have caused huge damage to Bangladesh, as they have transferred crores [ten million] of taka through hundi [illegal, non-bank money transfers] and they influence the immigration officers. If employers want people to work for them, they are the ones who must pay to bring them over. Now it’s the other way round. I think 99% of the manpower agents are tricksters. The Malaysians are also involved. When I came over in 1981, these people were very honest. They didn’t know what bribery was, but they too have become corrupt. I believe 90% of the business people have manpower business at their root. This is one of the most developed Muslim countries in the world. This is a modern Muslim country. There is a lot to learn from them. And they too shall prosper. If Bangladeshi workers can come here in a regulated legal manner then both countries will be benefited.”
Rashed Badal was born in Barodi Bajar, Sonargaon upazila, Narayanganj district. He came to Malaysia as a tourist towards the end of 1990. He went to Bangkok too. He liked the similarity with Bangladeshi culture and the fact that it was an Islamic country. Enjoying the uniform season, he stayed on till '93.

Rashed has done well. He runs two travel agencies. One more upmarket, aimed at tourists. Another, in the Bengali market area, which targets migrant clients. “The two companies have different business strategies. Here, I aim for about ten high value customers per day. In my other office, I need to sell hundreds of tickets to get the same returns, but there I have volume so it works out.

“A lot of Bangladeshis came over for work at that time, from about '89 to '91. From one to two lakhs. They came via Thailand. Some, like me, came to visit, others came for work. The visa was for three months, and at the end they would go to a neighbouring country and return. Eventually they could no longer get an extension and many became illegal. Towards the end of '91 the deputy prime minister Ghafar Baba declared that undocumented workers would be made legal. I believe it was the 8th of December when he announced all illegal workers would be given one month renewable work permits. That was when many foreigners became legal.
The employers, particularly in the manufacturing industries, liked Bangladeshi workers as they worked hard and long hours. Malaysia’s furniture export industry created a lot of demand for Bangladeshi workers. The Bangladeshis worked beyond the eight hour basic, often working twelve to sixteen hours. The owners profited.

“They set up new factories and increased production. Bangladeshis started entering into the construction business, where, until then, there were mostly Indonesians. The Bangladeshis would get paid less than their Indonesian counterparts, but were still prepared to work hard. The owners were happy. Between ’92 to ’95 some five to six lakh Bangladeshi
They see a different way of life and begin to think differently

workers were brought in. Besides manufacturing and construction, they even started going to the agriculture sector. Things got frozen on the 2nd of November 1995. It happened suddenly. People did continue to come in through special passes until 2006-2007-2008. Some three to four lakh people came in.

“Bangladeshis have also set up businesses. Some three to four thousand companies are registered here through joint venture with Malaysians. Some have gotten married, some have local partners. They are into mini markets, restaurants, maintenance service, some have leased land and produce agricultural goods. Now they are also involved in travel agencies and remittance business. I think it is important that we have a good relationship between our countries so we can do good business here. Of course there are laws in this country. It is when these laws are broken that problems arise. That is fine, but there are situations where even when people operate perfectly legally, there is harassment. That needs to be looked into. Similarly, it is fine that illegal workers are punished, but legal workers are also sometimes harassed. That is something that our High Commission needs to look into, especially the commercial counsellor.

“In '93-'94 women workers were brought in for the electronics and garment and hand glove factories. The women had patience and could do intricate work. I’m told they didn’t have to pay much to get here. In our country, women don’t often come into contact with men in the workplace, except perhaps in the garment industry. This makes it difficult for them to adjust, so they need extra support. On the other hand, not only is it an opportunity for them to earn money, but the exposure is valuable too. The women who come here see a different way of life and begin to think differently. I am aware that in Malaysia there are more women than men in many ministries. If this could happen back home, Bangladesh would develop.”
The Bangladeshi love of culture is just as strong in the diaspora community in Malaysia. The cultural event I was invited to was out of town. There were many fancy cars parked outside the resort in Kajang. The MC Badal Khan recited poetry eloquently, but the audience was more interested in selfies, and catching up with gossip. Children played with balloons. One little girl, tired from her exertions, spread out on the front seat and fell asleep. It was a little Bangladesh. Pop songs and dancing changed the mood somewhat. My Malaysian friend Nazir Sufari was stunned. He had a fixed idea of what Bangladeshis were like and had not seen this side of them before. Song, dance, poetry and comedy entertained the Bangladeshis, many of whom had travelled many miles to attend the cultural ceremony. It was a buffet dinner, and people queued up for food. Undocumented workers and students rubbed shoulders with business magnates, doctors and other professionals. Household help stood in line with masters of the house. Such ‘indiscretions’ would never have been permitted back home.
Bangladeshi culture night in Kajang, Selangor
Tun Dato’ Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad was the fourth prime minister of Malaysia. His tenure from 1981 to 2003, made him the longest-serving holder of that office. He played a key role in bringing in workers from Bangladesh to Malaysia. The former premier was 91 on 10th July 2016. I met him at his office in Petaling Jaya, the next day. Following are extracts from his interview.
On migration:

“I believe in the future there will be no single ethnic country in the world, except for China. Because mobility of people is very great now. You can move from Kunming to Kuala Lumpur in three hours, where before it would take six months and no guarantee that you will reach and maybe drown at sea. But today it is much easier to travel across borders and borders are more porous and people want to lead a better life so they move to countries where they can find a better life. So the European countries of the future, will be half Asian.

On Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia:

“I think Bangladesh, with its big population, hardworking people, and skillful people, I think you can do as well if not better than Malaysia. We have always been receiving foreign workers. Our development policy created a lot of jobs Malaysians were not quite willing to do. We needed workers.

“There is a lot of benefits we derive from workers working in this country. They make the industry work. Without them we would be short of workers and people would not invest. Bangladeshis can master most of the new technologies. They can do it here, I am quite sure they can do it at home.”

We needed workers
Dato’ Seri, M d. Abu Hanif Bin M d. Abul Kashem is relaxed in his luxurious home in Klang. The goldfish in the aquarium, the large TV screen, the plush sofa sets and the glittering trinkets all across the living room and the nine expensive cars parked outside clearly indicate he is a man of means. A Chinese young man, a business partner, is endearingly introduced as his ‘son.’ Expensively produced, but not particularly well-produced books, confirm his credentials.

Expensive cars parked outside clearly indicate he is a man of means

His Malaysian wife Datin Nur Firzanah Binti Abdullah, a management professional with a PhD is the managing director of the WJP Group (Warisan Juara Padu (SDN) BHD. Hanif is the marketing director. The back page of the slick company brochure has a full page photo of the couple lacquered over a background featuring artwork on what appears to be a museum wall. Two other Malaysian Datos are the chairman and executive director. The company’s mission statement is “To become Malaysia’s No. 1 most entrusted and value added
partner and representative in the supply, recruitment and outsourcing of foreign workers to all sectors and industries throughout [sic] legal and ethical means.” The brochure says the company provides a yearly placement of 4000-5000 workers. The services cover manufacturing, construction, the service industry, plantations and agriculture. They provide skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour. An impressive list of blue chip clients fill up several pages of the brochure. Dato’ Seri Hanif not only provides workers, but also “manages labour problems.” Even clients who have good connections with Bangladesh and have been
there to meet potential workers, leave the business of recruitment to him. A key advantage the company offers is to “reduce your painful labour relation issues.”

“You can focus and concentrate on your core competence in business and leave hassle free labour problems to us.”

In return for the “hassle-free labour problems” they handle, Dato’ Seri Hanif, evident from his lifestyle, is given a healthy return. The company is now multinational and in relaxed conversation, Dato’ Seri tells me how he is branching out to Africa.

Dato’ Seri Hanif has two families, one in Bangladesh and another in Malaysia. Besides his business in Malaysia, he has a plastic factory and a tourism business in Bangladesh. He also runs a training centre for workers. In Malaysia he has plantations, oil and gas as well as tourism companies. “By the grace of God, I am doing well,” he says. “There are 30-35 Bangladeshis like me. Five to seven are in good positions. Three Dato’ Seris.”

Born in 1972, Dato’ Seri Hanif lost his father when he was 16. He then joined the army but an uncle advised him that if he was to support his family, he should go overseas. He went to Malaysia in 1995. After working for two years in a Korean company, he set up
a business with Malaysian and Chinese friends. He then got a local partner, whose father was a cabinet minister. That changed things. He met Firzanah in 2000 and got married the following year. After marrying Firzanah, he set up a business with his new wife. Hanif’s observations about the governments are glowing.

“The Bangladesh government tries very hard. The Malaysian government is also very good. They too try hard. They made workers legal six months ago. Now 95% of the people are legal. They can send money home properly. They are doing well.

“The Bangladeshi High Commissioner is a very good man. It was after he came that people became legal. The High Commission is doing good work. The counsellor is also very good. This time the legalisation has been hassle-free. Everyone has got a beautiful passport.” Not everyone would agree.

I am treated to a fine dinner, home cooked by what looked like Philippine maids. He kindly instructs his Sri Lankan driver to drop me off at my hotel in Pudu Sentral. As I leave he passes me an envelope, refusing to have it rejected. “It is because I couldn’t really entertain you properly,” he says. I later find four crisp 50 ringgit notes inside and decide to buy him a book in return.
Dato’ Kesav Kumar Agarwal runs the Bharat Tea Estate in Cameron Highlands. His family originated from Uttar Pradesh, India. The Bharat Group of Companies was established in 1933. Today it comprises of a total of eight companies, of which Cameron Bharat Plantations is the most renowned. They were one of the first plantations to bring in Bangladeshi workers.
“Malaysia is dependent on foreign labour. You have to get the things straight. You have to acknowledge that you need labour to run this country. What had happened 100 years back when the British brought labour from India. The third generation Indians are the best doctors and lawyers in this country. It is crazy that I can hire a Russian, but can’t hire a Bangladeshi. What Russian would want to work in my plantation?

We as employers are very fond of them [Bangladeshi workers]. They don’t drink. They work hard. Whereas others don’t work as hard as Bangladeshis. They enjoy their drinks and they go. If I had a choice, I’d employ 100% Bangladeshis.”

I had interviewed Datuk Agarwal on 18th August 2016 at his office in Cameron Highlands.
Board members and workers of VG Metal Technology Sdn Bhd.
Major Ramasamy Menon, a retired army officer and his wife Vejaletchimie Chinnayah own VG Metal Technology Sdn Bhd. Their company is said to be the finest manufacturer of shipping containers. Rows of awards line up the corporate office. We sit in their spacious conference room, most of their workers are from Bangladesh. The couple know Bangladesh well and have visited the country several times, but obtain all their workers through Dato’ Seri Hanif. Rama and his wife explain that they see their workers as family. Watching them interact with the workers, and observing the body language, it is easy to believe.

Not all of Rama’s workers came in through legal means. Nasirul Islam had been smuggled across in the boot of a car from Thailand in 1996. He had travelled through water, land and forest for days, before the last part of the journey, crouched in the dark for 11 hours. It took many hours before he could straighten his legs at the end. Nasirul was one of the lucky ones. The dalal had promised it would be a pleasant journey, but many others who travelled through similar journeys, never made it alive.
Nasirul had worked in a Chinese factory. But he had heard that Major Rama was a good boss, and had approached him. Rama gave him a job, and he has stayed there ever since. He had gone back home and stayed for three years, but then he rang his former boss who took him on again in 2007. Nasirul now earns a good living and his family back home is much better-off. They built a house but he has no intention of staying back even if the opportunity comes up.

Rama remembers what it was like when he himself started out. The couple had worked hard to bring up their children. “I am so eager to work, but no job was given to us. Now, you see. The salary is not low now. It’s very high salary. We are giving the national standard salary. Starting salary is 900. They have overtime. Now my boys [are] earning more than 2000-3000 salary, you know. Abu was withdrawing 6000 salary, the last drawn salary, you know.”
Nasirul is hugely grateful to Rama and Vejaletchimie. “They have done much for me,” he says. “My parents are far away; they are very special.”

Vejaletchimie has a loud laugh. “Sometimes I am didi [elder sister], amma [mother], some call me aunt. I never see them as my workers. They are like family. We are not a rich family. Very hard to earn money. So they are helping... each other, no? Whatever will come we share only. Like a cake, a piece of cake. That way only we start our business. Till now I am very happy to see them. Every time they’ll call me, why you not come to the factory? We want to see you. I say OK OK I’ll come. They say, please just walk around the factory. One week so-and-so, one month so-and-so. 7:45 in the morning they do the exercises. Then I’ll come, then I see all the workers. Then I’ll follow with them then until two hours, until ten, I am very happy what I am today and just walk and see my family. They are very, very good people.”

They call me amma

Factory floor of VG Metal Technology Sdn Bhd.
Migration involves a degree of cultural exchange regardless of how little interaction there is. Assimilation is easier between Malaysia and Bangladesh, as they both have a largely Muslim population. The abundance of women in the workforce at all levels is something that Bangladeshis surely see. Many Bangladeshi men marry Malaysian women, who are often their business partners. In the plantations, men have to do the cooking, the cleaning and the washing, which would normally be done by their wives. Yet patriarchal norms seem to be entrenched and while there are other behavioral changes, similar to Abul, very few Bangladeshi men share home chores upon their return. Women and men pray together (though physically separated) in Masjid Negara, the national mosque in Malaysia. Yet, I have not come across a single migrant (man or woman) who has suggested that such a system be adopted back home.
Md. Shaheen Sardar, the senior general manager at IGC - Industrial Galvanizers Corporation (M) SDN BHD, continues to spend time with workers at the factory floor. I saw him in overalls, spanner in hand, down on his knees fixing things, setting an example to his workers. I wonder if Shaheen in Bangladesh would have the same work ethics, or whether Bangladeshi society would allow him to behave in the same way.

At the party in Kajang, a woman who was clearly a domestic worker, stood in the food queue, waiting to be served. The man serving appeared to be from a well-to-do home. Even in Malaysia, these cultural identifiers are recognisable, from clothes, demeanor, from body language. I couldn’t help admiring that the woman received no different a treatment from others in the queue, far higher-up in the social ladder. Would she be justified in expecting similar treatment back home? Probably not, though I’d love to be proved wrong.
Senior general manager Md. Shaheen Sardar still gets his hands dirty in the factory floor
Migrant men while overseas, do what is considered women’s work in Bangladesh.
Md. Hafiz was the second taxi driver to take me to that back entrance of the Bangladesh High Commission on Jalan 1/76, even though, on both occasions, I had given the address on Jalan U-Thant. It was upon meeting the High Commissioner Md. Shahidul Islam that the reason became apparent. The High Commissioner remembered me. He had been in the South Africa mission when I had gone to Johannesburg to take a portrait of Nelson Mandela. He greeted me with a big hug. He was a diplomat, but though he knew there were sensitivities, he was candid enough.

“We can deal with 200 [workers], at most 300 a day,” he said. “From February 2016, we have been receiving over 2000, sometimes over 3000 people a day.” He took me round the back, to the snaking line that went all around the swimming pool, through the narrow passageway onto the office on the other side of the building. “Today is a light day,” he added, “come on Tuesday and you’ll see what really happens. So what can I do? I take the peons, the security guards, people from the commercial section, whoever I can get, and get them to deal with it. This entire street is full of
embassies. Had we kept the front door open, there would be complete chaos. The back entrance is easier to manage.” The taxi route from Jalan 1/76 to the front of 114 Jalan U-Thant had been long. On the way back I followed a well-trodden mud path by number 96. Others must have made the same journey. True enough, the sign about holidays and opening times (written only in English) were on the tiny metal gate at the back! The taxi drivers knew where their passengers needed to get to. I was an exception.

The splendid breakfast was followed by an equally lavish lunch a couple of days later. We talked of old times and the general situation back home, but in between there were juicy insights. Much of it off-the-record. We slipped between Bangla and English, a broad rule being that the English version, was OK to quote!

“The deputy prime minister has said in parliament that the Bangladeshi workers are most loyal and dedicated, and if I tell you very frankly, really our workers are very loyal, hard working, loyal to the local laws and very less demanding and language acquisition skills are very high.

“Bangladesh has been included in the list of source countries and they have all opportunities to be employed in all sectors. It has already been implemented, but the process of recruitment will start very soon. It might take another ten-fifteen days.

“You should also talk to some of the people in the streets. They won’t have nice things to say about the embassy, but you should hear them out too.” This he said in Bangla, but by then, I had worked out the limits.

As the High Commissioner had warned, Md. Mohsin, whom I met at the closed back entrance of the embassy, was angry, “The Bangladesh embassy, they do as they please. They don’t care what the public wants. If they feel like working they work, otherwise, they’ll sit at the table, and have tea. I came four times, the last, a month ago. I’ve lost my passport and wanted to get a new one made. I am so angry with them. I’ll now
go back home [Bangladesh].” His friend Rahman, who grows vegetables in his own patch, also had unkind things to say. “I had to take time off work to get here. They give a time and a date, but when I get here they say, not today, come some other time. Come twenty days, fifteen days later. They give me a phone number, but you never get through on the phone and if the phone does ring, no one ever picks up. We know there are people inside, when we stand for two, four, five hours, we know they’re there. The delivery dates given on the receipt are well past, but still no sign of the passport. If they know you and you have paid them, then it works, people from outside, don’t stand a chance. Standing here won’t work, it all happens inside.” Mohsin chips in, “It is all about money.” They get more agitated and speak in turns.  “The people you see, they are the agents, the dalals, they have contracts with the people inside. If you pay them, they get it done. They are people from outside. They make all the arrangements. Only if they [dalals] fix the papers will they [embassy officials] say things are O.K. Otherwise they won’t O.K. them. They’ll find problems. Look they said they open half day on Saturday, but there’s no one here.”

This is perhaps what Shahidul Islam was alluding to. The High Commission website clearly states that the office is closed on Saturdays and Sundays. But with so few officers serving so many people, even the information gets filtered by intermediaries. Few people realize that the papers they’ve submitted (via dalals), might not be genuine in the first place. The people making the promises, might be complete swindlers. Islam, does however, admit, that not all his staff are angels, and that there was scope for collusion.
Manpower business is exactly that, a business, and in any business, people stand to make money. Interestingly, this is one business where you don’t need to make an investment. Everyone along the chain makes money, everyone except the worker.

Taxis aren’t easy to come by at Jalan U-Thant. Luckily, one had just arrived. Md. Joshim got off, only to find that the embassy was closed. He should have known, as it was a Saturday, but as in the case of Mohsin and Rahman before him, information...
was often lacking. The website is often down, as it was when I last checked, and is only in English. I myself had made numerous attempts to get through on the phone, and had never succeeded. The sign (on the back door of the embassy) giving opening times, is also in English. It appears no one had bothered to tell Joshim about the opening times. As Shahidul Islam himself had alluded, the only communication is via dalals. The workers never get to meet genuine embassy officials. There are simply too few, to serve too many. Thankful for having found a taxi, I offered to drop Joshim off at Pasar Seni LRT. We stopped in between for a meal.

Joshim is from Chandpur. The eldest of six siblings. The family being poor, his parents decided to borrow money to send the eldest son off to Malaysia in the hope that he would be able to pull the family out of poverty. He had paid Ayub, a local dalal, 4.5 lakh taka. Four lakhs in cash in Bangladesh and another 1200 ringgit in Malaysia to get his passport back. The factory where he was promised work, never existed. He managed odd jobs. In the last job, he was paid 2000 ringgit for three months work. An uncle arranged a job with a Tamil owner. Joshim was arrested by plainclothes police (he has no way of knowing if they were genuine), for being in a job not stipulated in his visa, but released after paying 350 ringgit (much higher than the normal rate for bribes) and he left after he was beaten up by the owner. The dalal took no responsibility after he was brought to Malaysia. Joshim now works in a construction company. It is owned by a Bangladeshi, also from Chandpur.
The owner is a sub-contractor. With overtime Joshim can earn 1800-2000 ringgit a month, though one month he managed to work flat out and earned 3000. His passport runs out on 17 January 2017. The High Commission told him to come back after a month. When he did, he was told to come back after a further two weeks. As he couldn’t get through on the phone, Joshim took a day off and came over to the High Commission only to find it closed. Apart from the travel costs, he has lost a day’s earnings. Joshim has been promised, by yet another dalal, that once his passport is renewed, his visa can also be renewed for two years, and for the factory where he works, it will cost another 7 to 9 thousand ringgit. If he is lucky and gets to keep the job, he will be able to pay the visa costs through a year’s work! What he saves the next year will pay back part of his ongoing debt. Joshim hopes to stay for ten years. It will take him the first five to repay debts, and then, if things go well, he will eventually earn.

In calculating his earnings, Joshim discounts his own labour, as do farmers and garment workers, and all low-paid employees in Bangladesh. They feel no entitlement for their labour. It is a given. Whatever is left over, after the human machine is fed and housed is ‘profit.’ A very different accounting practice to what the factory owner and all other ‘owners’ use in their calculations.

After working for ten years, “if God wills” Joshim will be able to pay for the education of his brothers and his sisters, and pay back his loans. “All I want is for my parents to be happy,” says Joshim. His own happiness is perhaps too much to even dream of.
It took longer than I had anticipated. I was to meet the leading human rights activists in the country, in separate locations, have lunch with the Bangladesh High Commissioner, pick up my luggage at the hotel and make it to the airport – all in one day. I also wanted good light, interesting composition and my subjects to feel relaxed! It was a big ask. Parimala Narayanasamy, Program Officer, Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility (CARAM) Asia, made things easier for me. Rather than directing me through the complicated route, she came to the LRT.

"Just go down the escalator and walk through the building," she'd instructed and there she was. Ordering a Grab Taxi even before we started, we jumped straight into the interview. I had little to do, Pari knew the subject inside out. I turned on the recorder and off she went. And she didn’t spare any punches.

"Initially Bangladeshi migrant workers were brought into the country and the government allowed recruitment only by employers who needed them and to an extent it worked, as employers who recruited them were established. This has changed in recent years as labour contractors act as middlemen. That was when problems started. Instead of recruiters they became labour suppliers. Greed set in and they brought in workers without ensuring work was available. Workers were left stranded. There was no assurance of proper living conditions. Labour contractors shortchanged them. Recruiting agents made lots of profits from this."
“In 2013 the government announced that minimum standard legislation applied to everyone, including migrant workers, which included minimum wages. But recruiters always find a way to shortchange the workers. However, while the minimum wage was introduced, the payment of levy became the responsibility of the workers themselves. So in effect, this took away the benefit of the minimum wage and they were deprived of additional money. Migrants also had to fork out money for accommodation, food and utilities. This is an area where sending governments should come out strong to say that if any country needed workers then they [sending countries] should set the terms and conditions.

“The bottom line is there is a lot of money involved. They pay a lot to the recruiting agents to get a job here. They are cheated all the time. All the way they are cheated. It’s a cycle you know. The passport is with the employer. At the same time, you can’t go and complain to the union, because you are not allowed to join a union. From the time they leave their place, until they are here and when they go back. Migrants are the silenced lot and often feel intimidated too.”

Though I’d known Irene Fernandez for many years, I had never made it to the Tanaganita office before. Outside the bungalow in Petaling Jaya was a memorial to Irene, made by Bangladeshi migrant workers. A posterised image of Irene looked sideways out of a large digital banner on the front wall. Even though this dedicated activist had gone, her presence was larger than life.
Mohammad Harunur Rashid greeted me as I entered the office. My previous meetings with him had always been in the field. Often in the Bengali Market. I had just picked up a copy of The Revolving Door when I was ushered in. Pari had warned me that Glorene A Das, Executive Director, Tanaganita (Women’s Force), had another meeting to go to, but Glorene and Irene’s sister, Aegile Fernandez, Director/Consultant ATIP Unit seemed more concerned about how I’d make it to the airport in time, than their own busy schedules. Soon the conversation warmed up. It was activist to activist, and the words flowed easily.

The story about how exactly the arrest warrant against Irene was issued, and how her team had outwitted the police, was something they wanted to tell, and I wanted to hear, so we ignored the clock. It is at times like this that I realise how similar our countries are. And how our stories intersect at so many levels. “She was convicted, after thirteen years of trials,” Glorene pointed out. “We appealed and that went on for another five years, and then the notes mysteriously were ‘lost’ and they found a [face saving] way of letting her go.”

The case had been about the treatment of Bangladeshi migrant workers at detention centres. “So you can see, why Bangladeshis have a special significance for us,” Glorene added.
“Why do some receiving countries continue not to have comprehensive policies to manage migration? It’s because at the end of the day, they do know that they can exploit the workers, because the non-existence of these policies only further exploits. And that’s where the money is.

“Why do we want 1.5 million new workers to come to Malaysia when we already have five million of them here undocumented? It’s not just the migrant workers, it’s also the refugees who are working, you know. But why not legalise them and give them proper documents? You don’t need to spend so much money and we do need workers. Instead of bringing 1.5 million when migrants themselves have to sell land and take loans, in fact the sending countries are giving loans, putting them further into debt.

“So there was a halt, because there was an outcry, a strong outcry, from migrant and civil society organisations, then what happened? They made the process so difficult, for the employer to legalise the workers, we started getting calls from employers expressing their concerns, and telling us their challenges, now that is a very structured thing about the government, I’m not afraid to say that, because alternatively they will say, you know, employers haven’t registered.

“In about a month or two they are going to bring in 1.5 million, but why for the next three years? Five [hundred] thousand, five hundred thousand, five hundred thousand... because we know the general election is coming in 2018.”

Why not legalise them now and give them proper documents?
In journalistic investigations a question that keeps cropping up, is cui bono (Latin, who benefits)? Clearly there is a need for migrant workers. Just as clearly, the workers need employment. Merging these needs should result in a situation where the origin and destination countries both stand to gain, as of course do the workers themselves. The benefit of the origin and destination countries has been amply observed. Malaysia’s growth has been fueled by the availability of affordable labour, both skilled and unskilled. Bangladesh too has benefited from remittance. Other gains are less visible. Foreign workers have brought in a cultural diversity that all nations must embrace in an increasingly globalised world. The entrepreneurship of the Bangladeshis has injected energy into the economic space of Malaysia. There are numerous Bangladeshi-Malay partnerships at all levels that have prospered. Greater trade between the two countries has benefited many along the money chain. Bangladeshis have gained exposure, learned a new language, developed skills that they have brought home. The benefit of the workers however, has not been uniform. Nasirul, Belal, Rashed and Shaheen have all done well. Even Nazrul and his roommates who have had hard lives, feel they have done well overall and given the chance they would do it again. But this is certainly not true of all migrant workers. Stories of gross abuse and tragic losses grab the headlines, but there are more everyday occurrences and terms of employment that need to be looked into.
Nowhere in the world are all bosses like the ones Nasirul, Abu and Shaheen found. Labour conflicts exist across the globe. When opportunities for exploitation exist there will always be some who will take advantage. But given systems and processes of check and balance, things should work out much of the time. What should be done to ensure that the sad stories are the exception rather than the norm? As Dato’ Agarwal points out, it is a question of demand and supply. There is certainly demand. It is at the supply end, that complications arise. The desperation that many Bangladeshis feel for overseas employment, make them ripe victims for all the people along the supply chain. Exaggerated claims of the utopia that awaits, is believed because people want to believe. In the search for nirvana, they pay far more than they should, can afford, or is justified. Unprepared, inexperienced and ill-informed, they fall prey to all the vultures that lie in wait. And vultures can smell easy pickings.

Efforts are being made and there is always room for improvement. A well-informed public, a well-regulated migratory process and sufficient checks and balances at all levels of engagement, can ensure that the experience of migration becomes life-changing in a positive way. And as Tun Dato’ Seri Dr. M ahathir bin M ohammad says, Bangladesh’s economy can equal or even surpass Malaysia’s. Babu Biswas’ poems will remain beautiful, but perhaps, less sad.
THE WEARY TRAVELLER

by Babu Biswas

Weary my feet, heavy steps with toil
Forlorn far shores, lonely and in foil
Age creeps along, strength ebbing nigh
Moving on is a chore, my ends I defy.

This defeat that I carry, how much longer will I pine
This endurance that is mine, it is God’s will divine
Faces familiar, now so far away
Home, forgotten, leafy boughs no longer sway.

The heart says enough, this exile must end
The home that awaits you, misery will mend
My lover awaits me, my footsteps she pines
To you I’ll return, this land will never be mine.

Translated by Shahidul Alam
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amma</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhat</td>
<td>Cooked rice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bidesh</td>
<td>Foreign country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boro Bhai</td>
<td>Elder brother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calling</td>
<td>Employment visa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chop</td>
<td>Visa renewal stamp on passport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crore</td>
<td>Ten million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dal</td>
<td>Lentil soup (taken with rice, not separately as a soup)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dalal</td>
<td>Manpower agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didi</td>
<td>Elder sister</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eid</td>
<td>Important religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide</td>
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<tr>
<td>G2G</td>
<td>Government to government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hundi</td>
<td>Illegal (non-bank) international money transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakh</td>
<td>Hundred thousand</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRT</td>
<td>Light Rapid Transit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mangsho</td>
<td>Meat (usually red meat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Md.</td>
<td>Abbreviation for Mohammad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mishti</td>
<td>Bangladeshi sweets made from curd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moira</td>
<td>Maker of mishti</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ringgit</td>
<td>Malaysian currency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taka</td>
<td>Bangladeshi currency</td>
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A photographer, writer, curator and activist, Shahidul Alam obtained a PhD in chemistry before switching to photography. His ongoing personal project “A Struggle for Democracy” is a milestone in documentary photography practice in Bangladesh. A former president of the Bangladesh Photographic Society, Alam set up the Drik Picture Library and Majority World agencies, Chobi Mela Festival of Photography and Pathshala, South Asian Media Institute, considered one of the finest schools of photography in the world.

Alam has been shown in MOMA in New York, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Royal Albert Hall and Tate Modern in London. A guest curator of Whitechapel Gallery, National Art Gallery Malaysia, Musée du quai Branly and Brussels Biennale, Alam was given the Shilpakala Award in 2015 for his contribution to the arts in Bangladesh.

A speaker at Harvard, Stanford, Oxford and Cambridge universities and top museums worldwide, Alam has been a jury member in prestigious international contests like World Press Photo, which he chaired. Alam is a visiting professor of Sunderland University in UK, an advisory board member of National Geographic Society and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.