Invisible journeys across India–Bangladesh Borders & Bubbles of Illicit Networks: stories of cross-border rural–urban...
Invisible journeys across India-Bangladesh borders and bubbles of corrupt networks: stories of cross-border rural-urban migration and economic linkages

Hosna J. Shewly and Md. Nadiruzzaman

Abstract: Drawing on ethnography and retrospective memories of peoples’ journey across the India-Bangladesh border, this chapter seeks to understand corrupt spaces and flows – process of their migration decision, networks, destinations, challenges, expectations and survival strategies in everyday life. The focus on journeying and methods of illegal and provisional migration from one country’s coastal zone to other country’s megacities can represent corrupt spaces from three perspectives - organised network of illegal migration, corrupt organizations at different scales and locations, and different bubbles of economies embedded in it. In doing so, this research shows the ‘circuits’ of corrupt spaces and economic activities through short-term and circulatory migration.

Key words: circulatory migration, corrupt spaces, India-Bangladesh border, retrospective memories, journey

Introduction

Illegal movement of people across international borders and invisible presence of illegal migrants in various mega cities’ economic activities largely depend on economic globalisation, war, destitution, and a state’s capacity to rule its international borders. Unlike South-North migration, cultural similarity and geographic proximity are significant migration drivers for South-South migration (Nawyn, 2016: 83, Samaddar, 1999). Such factors are also central for ever-evolving illegal cross border networks and migration. And, it needs to be acknowledged...
that simple macroeconomic differences between migration sending and receiving countries can only portray a partial picture of the complex realities that drive migration (Van Hear, Bakewell and Long, 2012). The rise of cross border illegal movements not only raises academic curiosity but also generates political rhetoric between migration sending and receiving countries. Bangladeshi migrants in India are a matter of huge bilateral controversy at state level, while India, without reference to any valid survey, expresses concerns about the influx of millions of Bangladeshi illegal migrants that Bangladesh absolutely nullifies. Thus, the existence of illegal migrants is highly disputed bilaterally, so as are their eventful stories.

Bilateral migration statistics between India and Bangladesh offer fascinating evidence. It is reported that 500,000 Indians illegally work in Bangladesh while India claims that annually 25,000\textsuperscript{1} Bangladeshis enter India with tourist visas who never return (Jamaluddin, 2009). It is worth mentioning here that Bangladesh was fifth among the top fifteen remittance sending nations to India in 2013, after the UAE, Saudi Arabia, USA and UK (The Economic Times, 2014). Significantly, however, illegal Bangladeshis in India have long been a concern among Indian politicians and academia. As part of security concerns, India fenced more than 3000 km of its land border with Bangladesh and border guards are vigilant round the clock. Unsurprisingly, such measures could not stop cross border movements. Besides, the number of people migrating to another country does not distinguish the patterns, process and drivers of migration. Here, in this chapter, we are concentrating on short-term and circulatory migration of people who are vulnerable to natural disasters.

\textsuperscript{1}This figure is about Bangladeshis who visit India to legal permit and do not come back. However, there is another group who cross the border illegally with an intention to work in India. There is no valid referenced data on them. In different Indian literatures and newspapers, there are anecdotal estimate of 1-2.5 million illegal Bangladeshi migrants working in India.
This ethnographic research builds on experiences of many cross-border trespassers, brokers and analyses oral stories of their journey. This research seeks to understand corrupt spaces and flows from retrospective memories of peoples’ journey across the India-Bangladesh border – processes of their migration decision, networks, destinations, challenges, expectations and survivals in everyday life. It is not the growing ease of travel rather growing cross-border illegal networks that contributes mostly in such migration. The focus on journeying and methods of illegal and provisional migration from one country’s coastal zone to the other country’s megacities can represent corrupt spaces and flows from three perspectives - organised networks of illegal migration, corrupt government agencies/agents in different scales/locations, and different bubbles of economies involved in it. Theoretically, this chapter thus, contextualises corrupt spaces and flows through short-term and circulatory migration. In doing so, it also contributes to the cross-section of border and migration literature by showing (i) the cross-border journey of migration as a significant methodological aspect understanding the process of migration; (ii) circulatory illegal migration, a less attended but important part of migration; and (iii) positive aspects of circulatory illegal migration in migrant’s livelihoods and their places of origin.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. It begins with a theoretical focus on actors of legal and illegal border crossings and migration. The following section will then concentrate on academic scholarship on mobilities and migration across the India-Bangladesh border. Then, the chapter moves onto the methodological aspects of this research followed by an empirical section on illegal movements across India-Bangladesh borders. A discussion section will analyse the connections and contributions of the empirical findings in existing knowledge on illicit/illegal networks. And, finally the conclusion summarises the findings.
International Borders, Illegal networks and Circulatory Migration

Here, in this chapter, the illegal involves a range of individual and networked actions/activities related to illegal human migration movements across India-Bangladesh borders and big and growing cities which create a complex impact on traditional aspects of state authority and control over international borders and mobility. Illegal migrants are generally attracted to rising Indian mega cities where they have better employment opportunities, hence our focus is on big cities. Cross border illegal movement and migration have long been considered as key focuses in international security, border, migration and mobilities literature. Here, we focus on various actors who facilitate or restrict cross border illegal journeys and the economies involved in them.

A vast majority of interdisciplinary literature considers border crossing points and state border agents as a centre of attention, examining the effectiveness of border security measures to curtail illegal movement, especially in post 9/11 contexts. Scholars have shown border agents are most powerful actors in deciding border crossers’ fate and creating a space of exception where human and refugee rights are at stake (Salter, 2008; Mountz, 2008; Lyon, 2003). The use of advanced technology, identity documents and delocalisation of border checks have also developed a new network of actors and algorithm methods managing the international border (see Balibar, 2004; Amoore, 2006; Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Walters, 2006). Nevertheless, border walls and fences perform new materialities of security paradigms although critical scholarship questions whether these are as effective as expected or merely politically choreographed ineffective missions by the state elites (see Jones, 2012). Ironically, a vast majority of state borders are unguarded or thinly guarded while overwhelming security measures are taken at the border checkpoints (see Johnsons & Jones, 2016). While these
important critical scholarships reflect the grey zones of border security networks and worries about border securitisation intentions, the focus remains on state actors and border trespassers.

Illegal actors and their networks have also received diverse theoretical attentions in social science literature. Scholars consider the oppositional aspects of legal and illegal or/and often focus on how legal economies can fight against illegal economies to stop trafficking (see Shelley & Bain, 2015). Others have shown how ever growing transnational smugglers, human traffickers or drug dealers exploit people and find ways through the gaps in border security measures which are often prominent in conflict or war zones (Niam, 2006; Herbert, 2014). Another academic centre of attention, on the other hand, is on borderland realities and the nexus between legal and illegal. As such, academics have theorised the zones of ambiguity and illegality in the borderland. Heyman and Smart (1999: 1) argue that the ‘state law and eviction of state law should be studied together’. Besides, these illegal networks are not always centralised organised groups but rather fluid ones involving a vast population of participants for mutual advantage (Campbell, 2013). Our research findings echo scholars who have shown that illegal actors are not isolated but rather connected to legal actors, often border security agents.

Here, we show the ‘circuits’ of corrupt places and economic activities through illegal migrants’ circulatory journey across India-Bangladesh borders. This can provide a wider and meaningful interconnected picture of the different stakeholders including state and illicit actors across borders. Understanding circulatory migration through migrant journeys – to a migrant receiving country and further journey back to the origin country – and the impact of such migration on their livelihood and well-being contributing to the local economy are under-theorised domains of international migration and border literatures. It provides an opportunity
to understand the associations between ‘economic flows and the places through which it passes’ (Hall, 2013:379). The following section shows how mobilities and migration across this border have been examined in the literature.

**Mobilities and Migration across the India-Bangladesh Border**

The India-Bangladesh border, the fifth longest land border (4095 kilometres) of the world, is considered to be one of the most dangerous borders of the world. On average, Indian border guards, Border Security Force (BSF), kill 50 Bangladeshis every year (see BBC Bangla 2016). Human Rights Watch (2010) identifies BSF as a ‘trigger happy’ force because of their aggressive use of power to shoot civilians at the Bangladesh border. And Jones (2009: 787) defines BSF as ‘agents of exception’ because of their securitisation process in the borderland by converting farmlands into spaces of exception. Still, diverse mobilities and migration across this border continue since the partition of 1947. No-man’s-land does not apply to this heavily populated borderland as local cultivators own and cultivate all the lands up to zero lines of the border as observed during our participant observation (also see Van Schendel, 2005; Jones, 2009). Mundane social and agricultural activities around the zero line, thus, not only provide easy hide out for smugglers and traffickers in disguise, but also accelerate border casualties when people accidentally enter India.

---

2 India-Bangladesh border, in many areas, runs through agricultural lands and settlements. As a part of securitization of border, the BSF increasingly exercised their ability to violently impose their authority in the political border.

3 The end of British rule in 1947 led to a division of India first and foremost on the basis of religion. The demand of Pakistan was the outcome of three factors—such as continuing religious feuds, the uneven economic development providing some real basis of fears of ‘Hindu Imperialism’, and dispute between the Congress and the Muslim League over power sharing in postcolonial India. Partition and the cartographic procedure to divide Bengal followed ‘religion and other factors’ criteria. The ‘other factor’ was vague and contributed to disputes over the demand of territory within the boundary commission. Ultimately, the Commission failed to agree upon the best way to divide the united Bengal which, eventually, led Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Commission, to take the responsibility of bisecting Bengal. For detail on partition procedures and its consequences see Van Schendel (2005), Chatterji (1999), Hodson (1985).
Bengal was a single administrative, social and cultural entity before the partition of India in 1947 and the division of British India into India and Pakistan coincides with the creation of an international border through Bengal. Staying in Delhi, without any physical survey and only using some outdated maps, Sir Cyril Radcliffe decided the fate of voiceless millions living in an active delta (for detail, see Van Schendel, 2005; Chatterji 1999; Hodson 1985). It is worth mentioning here that the international border through Bengal did not strictly follow the religion criteria, as Van Schendel (2005) shows only 26 percent of the borderline separated a Muslim majority area in East Pakistan from a Hindu majority one in India. Such creation of the border triggered an extraordinary movement of people across the Bengal border to avoid violence and brutality. A growing scholarship on the partition consequences shows mass displacement, minority identity and shift of Hindus to West Bengal (see Das, 1995, Feldman, 2003; Banerjee, 2010). A gap still remains in the literature about the Muslims’ journeys to East Pakistan (the only exception is Rahman & Van Schendal, 2003). Beyond this dominant discourse of violent displacement and the vulnerability of Hindu minority identity, Sanyal’s (2014) take on hegemonic roles of refugee Hindus in West Bengal and the construction of ‘Hindu space’ by uprooting Muslims not only provides a new insight into post-migration actions, but also shows territorial rights based on religion. Not all post-partition migrations are forced, there are numerous cross-border labour migrants and cross-border settlers after marriage as well as migration for better living conditions or maintaining status with society (Rahman & Van Schendal, 2003; Sanyal, 2009). Some permanent migration is cumbersome to distinguish as it happens slowly, invisibly and unofficially. For example, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows, Hindus were 22 percent in the 1951 census, falling to 14 percent in 1974, and even lower to only 8.4 percent in the 2011 census (The Hindu, 2016).
Muslims migrating to India, especially to northeast India, is another concern in India leading to political rhetoric and national election agendas for removing illegal immigrants to Bangladesh. Indian political elites define 3.2 million Bangladeshis are living in India (see Sur, 2014). The idea of fencing the border was first proposed in India by the politicians of Assam in 1964 before the independence of Bangladesh. There was a protest in Assam that illegal immigrants from East Pakistan were causing a remarkable change in the local demography (tribal-non tribal ratio). Soon after the suggestion of completely sealing the border, the government of India decided to prevent infiltration by putting barbed wire fencing in selected areas (Bhasin, 2003). This was primarily a political statement and the fencing project resumed after a violent anti-foreigner movement in Assam in 1979. The movement was for the deportation of all Bengali and Hindi speaking people settled there from Bangladesh and other parts of India. Similarly, other provinces of India adjacent to Bangladesh, West Bengal and Tripura wanted government action to stop infiltration from Bangladesh. Following this demand, the government considered the erection of a fence in West Bengal, Tripura and Assam to cover a 3200 km border (Bhasin, 2003). India’s fencing project covered construction of single to double wired composite fences fitted with sophisticated electronic devices, especially on the India-Pakistan border. The project included 2,800 km of border roads and 24 km of bridges along the India-Bangladesh border (Van Schendel, 2005).

Scholars have theorised illegal migration across the India-Bangladesh border from the perspectives of the state’s territorial sovereignty, paper citizenship, or demographic invasion (Samaddar, 1999; Sadik, 2009). In a very well-articulated book on ‘paper citizens’, Sadik (2009: IX) makes a powerful argument that immigrants might be illegal or unauthorised, but they are seldom undocumented. He shows how illegal migrants from Bangladesh are gaining and performing citizenship in mega cities of India using fake documents. While the literature
is rich in theorising a diverse kind of migration from Bangladesh to India since partition, other significant aspects of illegal human movement remain unexplored; such as, material benefits of all actors and hidden political economy which stimulates the whole process and keep all the actors into this business. Most importantly, the temporary nature of illegal migration and migrants’ journeys back to their homes have been entirely overlooked in this rich scholarship on borders and migration in the region. Therefore, tens of thousands of people, who are continuously moving across the border, their stories, challenges, survival strategies, sighs, successes, economic contribution, and everything remain unaccounted. This research is an endeavour to document their circulatory migration journey.

**Methodology and People under Study**

The field research followed two phases. In its first phase, both the authors conducted separate ethnographic field researches from September 2009 to April 2010 on mobility of the north-western borderland enclave dwellers in India and Bangladesh and on vulnerabilities of cyclone wrecked communities in two coastal villages in Southern Bangladesh. As part of their PhD projects, first author conducted 4 in-depth interviews and 10 informal group discussions with illegal migrants in a Delhi slum. And, the second author conducted several interviews with returned migrants in his field sites. The authors had their joint fieldwork for ten weeks (February – April, 2015) in two villages of the south-western coast. These villages were chosen as they have very strong India connections and most importantly, the second author has already gained trust within these coastal communities for maintaining continuous engagement since 2009 through ethnographic PhD fieldwork and two post-doctoral researches. Living with these communities for a relatively long period of time, working there as a school teacher, understanding the local power dynamics, participating in their social and familial events,
having been distinguished (as harmless) from other ‘outsiders’ such as NGO workers, government officials, journalists and philanthropists, the second author was in an advantageous position to use observations and to better understand the local context. The names of villages were anonymised to protect the identity of the respondents.

Rather than being guided by a list of predetermined questions, we preferred to be a part of the setting to be studied with an objective of participating in the wider detail of the subject matter. We gathered data in two different ways: a) observations (Arens and Beurden, 1977), and b) learning through talking to people (Crang and Cook, 2007), in this case, 16 informal in-depth interview at household and community level. We maintained a research diary to take notes. We spent time at local tea stalls, local government council office and local market places, and such public places.

**Illegal Journeys of Migrants**

This empirical section strives to elaborate on why, where and how people migrate. According to UNEP’s Geo Assessment Report (2016), more than 42 million people in the Asia and Pacific region were displaced during 2010-11 due to extreme weather events. Bangladesh is one of the most susceptible to these environmental stresses in the whole region. The southern coast of Bangladesh, our main research site, is often referred to as the Climate Change Ground Zero because it is highly susceptible to sea level rise, increased salinity, arsenic contamination, tidal surges, floods, and water logging. High population growth, reduced arable land, inadequate income earning opportunities, and changed land use together force local people into subsistence livelihoods. Income earning opportunities have shrunk further with challenged

access to resources, particularly for the grassroots. This changing environment of scarcity of livelihood opportunities triggers migration decisions. Faruk (2015) estimates the number of this migration could reach up to 15 million in Bangladesh by 2050.

In Bangladesh, 54 per cent of coastal communities are functionally landless and more than 30 per cent are absolutely landless\(^5\) (Jentoft et al., 2010). Fishing has always been the occupation of last resort (Allison and Ellis, 2001; Béné, 2003; Deb, 2009), an open offer from nature to anyone, whose other livelihood options are diminished (Alam, 2001). Table 1 shows a dramatic increase of fishers over the last few years in one of our research sites. Over the last few decades, land ownership has declined because of embedded economic polarization in the society as well as riverbank erosion along one of the research sites. Though land erosion was not a problem at other research sites, increasing population pressure on a small piece of arable land drove many to find alternative options for making their own living. Livelihood options, alternative to cultivation, available around our field sites are mainly wage earning in farmlands and from local development works, fishing in local open water bodies, and collecting timber and non-timber resources from the Sundarbans. Otherwise, temporary or permanent economic migration is also a choice (Rigg, 2007). As mentioned earlier, there is no systematic shift from one kind of livelihood opportunity to another, nor do they often pick one from a range of choices; rather people take on whatever is available to them (Ellis, 2000). However, decline in one livelihood certainly puts pressure on other available opportunities, as options are limited.

\(<\text{TABLE 1 HERE}>\)

Migration is one of those limited opportunities. Data from a very recent fieldwork (February – April, 2015) shows that 25 households have permanently moved away from the studied river

---

\(^5\) If a household possess less than half an acre of agricultural land, that is considered insufficient to produce enough to maintain household living. This group is call functionally landless. And absolute landless are households who does not have any agricultural land whatsoever. Both of them are considered as extreme poor groups and are entitled to apply for government lands.
island (out of 170 households) since the devastation of Cyclone Sidr (2007), and 22 of them have moved to the mainland across the river, where they have their ancestral roots and kinship network. More importantly, out of these 25 migrated households, 20 have migrated over the last three years. Combining both the field sites, until March 2015, a total of 368 people migrated from their ancestral home, out of which 161 people permanently settled elsewhere and 207 went away as temporary economic migrants. Interestingly, more than half of the total migrants (220 out of 368 people) have moved away from their home very recently, within less than a decade. Besides, the number of temporary economic migrants, both nationally and internationally, has also sharply increased. Migration is certainly a signal of what is happening on the ground. This could be due to a diminishing sense of place – people gave up and moved on. It also could be a sign of inhabitants’ positive desire to change their wellbeing with the support of remittances (see Black, et al., 2011).

As mentioned earlier, we interviewed people from two villages who have very strong connection to India. Each village is divided into eight to nine clusters depending on the concentration of houses. These clusters of houses are called ‘para’, where households are normally tied within an ancestral kinship network and have fair ideas of their neighbours’ present locations. Informal group discussions were conducted in these clusters, to estimate the number of migrants and their destinations. It was interesting to see two distinctive characteristics between the two villages in close proximity. In one village, almost one in six households rely on remittances from India. The other village, a few miles down the coast, also has dependence on remittance income, but they are from internal, mainly from two big cities, Dhaka and Chittagong. We found that people often move to a new place through their networks and that is probably one of the main reasons for these two villages, despite being in very close proximity, having two different migration destinations.
This research builds on stories and experiences of folks who have been frequently trespassing the India-Bangladesh border for many years. A significant portion of these displaced people happen to trespass the border and move to urban slums in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Haryana, Bangalore, Goa and other Indian cities. They have their own social networks set along the way to their destinations. Being trespassers, their legal work permit gets repudiated, which increases their attraction to employers as cheap labour. Below is a brief story of Ilias who rode a motorbike for the second author during his field visits since 2009.

Ilias, a motorbike rider and small trader at the local Upazila (sub-district) market, leads a solvent life with his wife, two children and elderly parents. Things were very different when Ilias was a teenager. He was one of three brothers and his father was a daily wage earner. They used to squeeze into a small hut on government land and hardly had three square meals on a regular basis. Being the eldest, Ilias was taken out from school when he was just 14 and engaged with his father in manual labour to raise the family income. Unable to cope with this, Ilias moved to India with the help of a broker in exchange for two hundred and fifty Taka (approximately US$3). Since then, for the last twenty years, he has travelled to India many times, working in different cities across India. He has had positive experiences in India, which inspired his other friends, who later joined him in successive journeys. Now, he has his own land, house, transport and small business. He has contacts in different border points as well as in India, which can get others through and find a job for them in India. We were 10-12 people listening to Ilias’s story on his rooftop on an autumn evening, where other than the two authors, all of them had stories like Ilias and several of them had travelled together to India at different times.
Border trespassing is coordinated by a network of brokers from a home village to the host employer. The first-time travellers are transferred from one broker to the other at different points. Travellers pay money to the first broker, who manages and negotiates contracts with other brokers and local border guards. Illegal trespassers are locally called ‘dhur’. During the time of our field visit in the early 2015, the average rate per ‘dhur’ transfer was 30-40 US dollars. One broker handles 15-20 ‘dhur’ and they all march to the border together. At the border, all local brokers hand over their ‘dhur’ to a different set of brokers, who negotiate the price with border guards across the border, and establish contact with brokers on the other side. For each ‘dhur’ border guards receive 10 US dollars; the brokers are not very honest in making such deals, as a broker confesses, “if we pay for 10 ‘dhur’, we take 15 across the border. During the rush of crossing border gates, border guards could not count the actual number of crossers” (interview: 25 March, 2015). The south-western section, like most parts of India-Bangladesh border, is controlled by barbed wire fences, watch towers and regular patrols. And, border gates are fully operated by Indian border security forces. Border transfers always take place under the cover of darkness in the transition between two shifts of duties of border guards. People run across marsh lands risking their life only to secure their living. Very often, couple of hundred ‘dhur’ cross the border in one transfer.

Not all of them are successful in this race. Those that make through the crossing complete the rest of their journey with their brokers on the other side of the border. Often young and beautiful females become the target of border guards’ sexual desires. Niaz explains,

---

6 The BSF and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) defend the respective sides of the border, which is carried out from the Border Outposts (BOPs). For BGB, a BOP normally comprises 15-20 foot soldiers and for BSF the number is 20-25 soldiers (Chowdhury, 2003, Janwal, 2004). On an average, the distance between BOPs varies from 10-20 km in Bangladesh side, and 5-6 km in Indian side. Border between these two countries are demarcated by border pillars. Indian Government erected border fence. Since such fencing is considered as a defence structure, this fence is not allowed inside no-man’s-land, 150 meters in each direction from the border line. Therefore, border fences are built in Indian Territory, off the no-man’s-land. Thus, BSF have a complete control on border gates.
‘in my third or fourth trip to India, a young couple were travelling with us. In a dark night, we arrived in an open field along the border, waiting for the broker’s signal to cross the border. Suddenly, the broker alarmed us that border force is approaching and told us to run. While all of us were scattered, running for our own life, the lady got missing from the back. She never turned up. Her husband was screaming like a mad. We all knew, she became a prey to border guards’ (Interview: 01 March, 2015).

We heard similar stories a number of times from different ‘dhur’. One of them even noticed such negotiation between the broker and the border guards.

This southern part of the border divides a deltaic coast and the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest of the world. Thus, natural features, such as rivers, marsh land and low lying areas, are not suitable for installing barbed wire fences. In such areas border movements are controlled by border security patrolling. Munni, a housewife and mother of a 6 year old girl, in her first ever trip to India, was with a group of ‘dhur’ who were using a river route. Suddenly, they recognized a patrol boat nearby and all of them jumped into the water and hid under water plants. After staying in the water for several hours, when they had an all clear signal from their broker, they boarded back on to the boat and headed towards the land. On the other side of the border, they walked until dawn to reach to a local transport terminal. From there, the ‘dhur’ team travelled via Shiyaldah, to Hawra and finally to Bengalore. From Bengalore, the team were split up and sent to their pre-set jobs. Munni joined as a domestic maid in an apartment block and worked for six years with the same landlord. During that time, she used to come back at least twice every year through those illegal routes. Within the first two years of her work and travel back and forth, she became a broker of ‘dhur’. She took her husband and two of her brothers on her second trip and hooked them up with a scrap recycling business.
From domestic work, Munni saved 1000 US dollars every year. She also had additional commission from working as broker. After six years of work, she and her husband together saved 15000 US dollars. They invested a portion of that money to buy land and build a house for themselves. The rest of the money they invested in buying agricultural lands, which they lease out to landless farmers. For the first time, Munni’s parents, who were the primary carers for her daughter, Asma, moved to a self-owned property. Asma is now thirteen and Munni decided to settle back home to give more time to her daughter. Her husband, Selim, will work in India for another few years and then will settle back home. He wishes to run in the next local government election as a council member for his Ward (village).

Nowadays, Munni goes on and off to India if she can organise clients, a team of ‘dhur’. She guides them to their destinations and comes back home. The most unique part of it, which supposedly drives clients or ‘dhur’ to this career path, is that a ‘dhur’ does not have to pay the initial transfer cost (30-40 US dollars) upfront. There is an arrangement of paying this service charge later in instalments as soon as the ‘dhur’ is in a job. Thus, in many cases, this is an initial investment for brokers, which gives them a regular income later. Also, as many of the ‘dhur’ informed us, they could not afford to pay 30-40 US dollars, when they first signed up to this job. A secured job at a destination and a flexible payment system together make this type of arrangement very attractive. For many of these ‘dhur’, Dhaka and Chittagong, the two largest employment hubs in Bangladesh, are very far and difficult for them to reach, since they do not have any contacts to these two cities. On top of that, in their view, as Indian currency is stronger than the Bangladeshi Taka, they can see the tangible growth of their assets, when they send/bring remittances to Bangladesh.
Once they are on the Indian side of the border, since they do not have legal work permits, they are cheap labour, and thus, have a high demand in the labour market. Female ‘dhur’ normally get engaged in domestic work. Their illegal presence helps raise their attraction in the job market, particularly to their landlords. Being illegal migrants, they refrain from exposure on the open job market, which allows their employers (landlords) to offer a cheap long-term deal. Again, for migrants, domestic jobs are hassle free, as security forces do not crack down on them. In construction industries and factories in growing cities, a ‘dhur’ can be more easily exploited than a genuine permit holder. Their complexion and physical appearance are similar to Indians. They can easily blend in with the rest of the population. However, they are often chased by the special security forces and by the police, particularly when they are identified by local police’s informers. These informers’ generally work as a connection between the city police and ‘dhur’. They negotiate a regular bribe deal with city police for not arresting illegal migrants, keep city police informed about illegal migrants who have not signed up to this regular bribe payment system, and negotiate a deal to bail illegal migrants out from police custody. The majority of informants mentioned that if they miss this regular payment, they become victims of the city police. If they are caught by the special security forces, they are eventually deported to Bangladesh. In case of being arrested by the police, they end up in jail.

There is a network of brokers who help to bail them out from jail.

There are also bubbles of fake brokers who take chances of peoples’ helplessness. When Amol, an illegal Bangladeshi migrant, was arrested in Delhi in 2010, he contacted a broker for 30,000 taka (US$ 375). Amol’s family borrowed this money with high interest rate from a loan shark. On receipt of this money, the broker did nothing. Amol served two years jail sentence under the Foreigner’s Act and then was deported back to Bangladesh. He came back home jobless and with a burden of huge debt.
From migrants’ personal accounts, there are both positive and negative stories and it is hard to
tell which is higher in number. However, two things were echoed very commonly across all
informants – i) their migration decision at the very first instance is triggered by desperation;
and ii) all through the journey, they live an anxious, alert and vigilant life. They understand
there are challenges, including the worst one of becoming a victim of border shooting, still they
hope for a sufficient savings to begin a better life back in home.

Discussion

Human mobility from stressed habitats is inevitable (Adger et al., 2009; Faruk, 2015; Islam et
al., 2014; van Hear, et al., 2012). Oliver-Smith and Shen (2009) reviews 321 research works
on global migration, published between 1958 and 2008. Interestingly, those researches have
major focuses on different migration drivers, particularly, environmental stresses, war and
economic challenges. About one-fourth of those papers are in-depth case studies on
Bangladesh. This signifies the reason for migration being such an important topic for this
country. Warner et al (2012) led a research project, titled, where the rain falls, in 8 countries
to understand the relationship between food security, rainfall and population mobility. This
research was conducted on small geographic locations in each country. In Bangladesh, its
research sites were the two small local government units (Union⁷) of Kurigram, a northern
district, which have a strong mobility network with Munshiganj, a central district (Ahmed et
al., 2012). Lu et al. (2016) have shown this migration pattern at national level. They used cell
phone data and analysed anonymised call data record to understand population movements
across Bangladesh over a two-year period. All other researches on migration are either on
internal migration or on international labour migration. This chapter introduces illegal cross

---

⁷ The Union is often abbreviated as UP (Union Parishad), the lowest tier of the Local Government structure in Bangladesh. A UP is divided into nine areas called Wards. A Member is elected from each Ward to sit on the UP.
border circulatory migration, which is not a new trend, but has merely been addressed earlier in migration literature.

As we see in theoretical and historical background discussion, existing literatures have concentrated around the beginning or at the end of their journey – why do people migrate (Adger et al., 2009; Faruk, 2015; Islam et al., 2014; Oliver-Smith and Shen, 2009; van Hear, et al., 2012) or how migrants are doing (Banerjee, 2010; Sadik, 2009; Sanyal, 2009). There is hardly any attention to migrants’ journeys to their desired destinations. The description of journeys, as outlined in this chapter, joins these two ends together. As shown in this chapter, illegal migrants’ journeys are the most significant aspect of illegal migrationhood, as Niaz, Amol, Munni and others feel and experienced risk, uncertainty, disappointment, achievement, and/or emotional strain. At the heart of the unauthorised journey, there are several actors who encourage/lure, facilitate/exploit, and, most importantly, control such journeys. A central focus on why, when, how a journey actually happens, can reveal rich experiential aspects of actors involved in it which can be a very useful concept and methodological approach for the scholars working on migration, mobilities and corrupt networks and flows.

Circulatory migration journeys provide several grey areas in relation to licit/illicit and legal/illegal practices and perceptions as such ‘the threshold between legal and illegal are not clearly definable’ (Chiodelli, Hall and Hudson 2017: 5). Firstly, local construction of licitness over illegality. Although unauthorised migration is illegal, people in the research sites consider it socially legitimate though risky. For example, people were open and frank sharing their circulatory migration journeys in public places like local tea stalls and everybody knew about others whereabouts. On the contrary, when we met a broker, who is now an elected member of a local council, he took us in the middle of a rice field so that none could hear us. Later, we
met him in a different place away from his locality, while he was more open and was not seemingly worried about if anyone was overhearing us. From several of such observations, it appeared to us that licitness and illicitness are subjective and relationally defined (Chiodelli, Hall and Hudson 2017) and are influenced by individual’s socio-political circumstances and their judgement on the interface of licit and illicit activities. Most decisively, it is not all what the state decides to be legal or illegal, rather how the people construct licit and illicit for their livelihood (Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005). In addition, the borderland’s historic and economic circumstances, and borderlanders’ perception of legal/illegal and licit/illicit are important factors in this consideration. Seven decades on partition, still borderland people are not keen visiting friends and families in other sides of the borders with visa. To them, it is irrational and unnecessary making a hundred and fifty miles travel to Dhaka for processing a tourist visa (which can be refused) to meet their friend and families living just hundred yards away across the border.

Secondly, this chapter brings – (i) grey zone where legal and illegal constituting intrinsic parts of corrupt network and flows in local, national and international scale; this grey zone connects local ‘dhur’ with Indian mega city employers through different layers of legal and illegal actors. And, (ii) ambiguous responses from the nation-state whose territorial sovereignty has been invaded by this parallel process and actors of corrupt networks. Corrupt state agencies are accomplices and the states have not taken any initiative to stop employers from offering job to any ‘dhur’. Instead, big corporates and builders take benefits out of it, by employing ‘dhur’ at a minimum rate. To the people, it is also a matter that state agents including border guards, city police, etc. are part of this network. Raineri (2017, this volume) explains drug trafficking in Sahara Desert, where drug traffickers are the nodes of a large network and are apparently static. The nodes operate their own gangs to get connected with other nodes. In our case, the setup is
completely different. Here, we see institutions, such as border guards, law enforcing agencies and employers are the nodes that ‘dhur’ weave through. As we see, from our interviews, stories and field notes, they have repeated experience of completing this circulatory migration and their main objective was to develop their material wellbeing. We see this common trajectory to all the cases we explained in the earlier section.

And, finally, it reveals that the illegal migrants also use their agency. Unlike forced refugee migration, these people negotiate and make their way out through corrupt networks and flows. It reflects their agency rather than completely being held within the illegal actors’ hands. Furthermore, such journey ‘as an agency of change and a transformative event’ for the life of migrants (Benezer and Zetter, 2015:303). Significantly however, a successful circulatory illegal migration, very often, encourages other journeys and roles in the corrupt networks and flows. As such Munni has turned to a broker from a ‘dhur’. From a subject of illegal flows, She became an agent of corrupt networks. This is also linked to local construction of licitness. Perhaps, subject and agent transformation is higher in this case because of such circulatory illegal migration is not considered illicit in the borderlands.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the circuits of corrupt spaces and flows through eventful journeys of circulatory migrants across India-Bangladesh border. It shows how different fluid actors participate in these circuits. This research, thus, shows the tensions between strict state surveillances across the borders on illegal human movement and a thriving business of illegal migration. At the same time, it represents a ‘systematic symbiotic relationship between legal and illegal’ (Hudson, 2014: 775). As mentioned earlier, we need to keep in mind that state
ascribed borders and the concepts of licit and illicitness are not same in the borderland. People have their own perceptions, practices and necessities, which drive many to cross international border illegally.

This chapter tells the story of circulatory migration journey from Bangladesh to India, where ‘dhur’ use their knowledge on different corrupt places and weave through those places to benefit their livelihood and wellbeing. The stories of Munni and Elias demonstrate how their drive for an ‘illegal’ circulatory migration has paid off in their life and wellbeing. Though we have consistently used ‘illegal’ while describing their journey, their world view on ‘corrupt spaces’ may differ from how the state defines it. To them, everyday challenges and anxiety that they have been facing are even worse than the risks they take to cross the border. To them, the state does not mean much, as they are marginalised, cornered and abandoned in terms of their social safety nets and wellbeing. Their stories also unmask the unexplored aspects of circulatory migration and challenges stereotypes of ‘Bangladeshi Muslim migrants permanently settling in to India’.

The people living in the Bengal borderlands exist below the poverty level and the principal economic activities include agriculture, wage labour and trade. Borderlands between India and Bangladesh are completely impoverished, threatened, and marginalised, and economically deprived (see Van Schendel, 2005). As we see in the above empirical section, an established network of ‘dhur’ and brokers existed for long time. As long as this impoverished nature of borderland exists, illicit network is potential to lure the marginal communities to become part of such network.

References


Chiodelli, F., Hall, T., and Hudson, R. 2017. ‘The grey governance and development of cities


The Hindu. 2016. Bangladesh’s Hindu’s number 1.7 crore, up by 1p.c in a year: Report. 23 June.


Table 1: Change in dependence on fishery resources (Upazila BBS Office)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of Fishing dependent families</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3250</td>
<td>3250</td>
<td>3250</td>
<td>3250</td>
<td>3246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of Fishers</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>5290</td>
<td>5284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>