

Working Paper
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**Migration for Hard Work: A Reluctant
Livelihood Strategy for Poor Households
in West Bengal, India**

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1. Introduction

For poor households in rural eastern India, wage work is very often the key means of livelihood. Yet jobs are almost always arranged informally, without a written contract, and reflect the temporary peaks of demand for labour in agriculture, brick-making, road-building and construction. Moreover, and especially for rural people located beyond the fringes of cities and towns, there is a limit to the number of days of employment within daily commuting distance. Thus tens of millions of poor people move away from their usual places of residence to find work for periods of weeks or months at a time (Deshingkar and Grimm 2005). Because it takes place almost entirely within the borders of a nation-state, this temporary labour migration, has only recently been considered worthy of notice by the major international organisations concerned with migration.¹

This is not forced migration; indeed studies carried out with migrant workers have revealed diverse and shifting motivations (Rogaly 2003; Rogaly and Coppard 2003, Seeley, Ryan and Hossain 2003, Shah 2006, Start and Deshingkar 2006). Yet nor is it entirely voluntary as people are often compelled by economic circumstances, including structures of inequality in their home localities², to take risky journeys and undertake arduous, unhealthy work that they would not take part in if they had alternative means of livelihood. The migration itself is a source of vulnerability because of a lack of effective regulation of employment conditions, because of having to set out without any guarantee of a job, and because of migrants' lack of powerful allies, or indeed networks of any kind, in the temporary destination area. Yet, paradoxically, the earnings from migration can be the only means available to poor households of creating greater control over their lives, including the power to choose not to have one or more members migrating.

This paper reports some initial findings of a study of how migrants in India and Bangladesh and the household members that stay behind reduce the insecurities they face (including hunger,

¹ See, for example, International Organisation for Migration 2005.

² See, for instance, Rafique and Rogaly 2005.

debt, ill-health and work-place exploitation) through drawing on available informal support, based in relationships with kin, neighbours, fellow migrants and even, at times, employers.³

The study is, in part, a study of change over time, as it involved the return by Deeptima Massey and Abdur Rafique from June 2005 to January 2006 to the eastern Indian locality where Rafique had conducted ethnographic research in 1999-2000.⁴ The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. The second section briefly describes the context of the study and the methods used. In the third section we go on to summarise some important changes that have occurred in the pattern of migration between 1999 and 2005. The fourth section of the paper presents three contrasting life histories to illustrate longer processes of change and draw together some possible hypotheses for why certain households continue to have at least one member who migrates temporarily at some point during the year while others have either stopped or never migrated at all. In the fifth section, we draw on participant observation to explore the kinds of informal support used by those who stay behind (usually women) in the absence of migrants (usually men). This area received relatively little attention in the earlier study.⁵ Finally, the sixth section summarises the paper and some emerging questions for our on-going analysis of data.

2. Context and Methods

In 1999-2000 Abdur Rafique spent one year based in a locality we have named Jalpara, in Murshidabad District, West Bengal, India. Murshidabad is one of the poorest districts of the eighteen in the state, ranking fifteenth in per capita income. Human development indicators are also relatively low -- sixteenth in the state (UNDP India 2004). The locality, which had 248 households, was selected because, like many other localities east of the Bhagirathi river, it was populated by households from which members moved temporarily for manual work elsewhere in West Bengal. Like other localities there, it too had a Muslim majority and a Hindu minority

³ As others have noted some such social relationships can themselves be restrictive and exploitative while simultaneously critical to livelihood security (see, for example, Wood 2003 and Gardner and Ahmed 2006).

⁴ It is also a comparative study with a socio-economically and agro-ecologically similar village in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh comparison will be discussed in later work and does not form part of the present paper. We are, however, grateful to our colleagues Janet Seeley and Md Azmal Kabir, who led the Bangladesh study, for continuing discussions and intellectual input throughout the project.

⁵ But see Rogaly and Rafique 2003.

(unusual in India), and local livelihoods were based around irrigated multiply cropped agriculture, and especially on agricultural wage work.⁶

The 1999-2000 study found that in spite of rapid agricultural intensification over the preceding two decades, there was insufficient local work for the people of Jalpara across the agricultural year. Population density at 1,101 per square kilometre in 2001 exceeded the already high West Bengal state average of 904 (Government of India 2001). Inequality had grown such that almost half the households owned no agricultural land. Relying on wage earnings from male labour (it was not considered appropriate for women to work for a wage except in the chilli harvest), men in 56 per cent of landless households, and in 17 per cent of households with micro-landholdings, migrated out up to four times a year for work transplanting and/or harvesting rice. The study found a difference in the meaning of migration between households with no agricultural land and households with tiny holdings of up to two acres (0.8 ha):

[M]igration by [landless households] is much more likely to be to meet the food and other daily expenses of such households in the off season. Slightly better off households are also vulnerable, but less so, and migration may be undertaken in order to save or invest for a particular purpose (Rafique and Rogaly 2005: 377).

During the study it was found that women who stayed behind when their husbands, brothers or fathers migrated had to make ends meet in the absence of any wage. They might be left with a few kilograms of rice but the daily tasks of running the household, and errands to shop for food or consult a doctor in the case of illness, involved borrowing money and favours. This in turn required investment in, negotiation and maintenance of social relationships in the village throughout the year (Rogaly and Rafique 2003). A re-study was planned to investigate more systematically the role of this informal support by household members staying behind, and also to examine the role of the state and other formal providers of social protection in comparative context (using a parallel study in Bangladesh). The new study involved eight months of further ethnographic fieldwork in Jalpara by Deeptima Massey and Abdur Rafique from June 2005 to January 2006. Massey and Rafique used taped life histories with thirteen women and fourteen men from twenty-six households. These households were selected to reflect different migration dynamics and specifically to reveal a) why some households continued to have at least one

⁶ See Rafique and Rogaly 2005 and Rogaly and Rafique 2003. Rafique's fieldwork was completed in August 2000.

member migrating; b) why other households had stopped migrating; and c) why still other households had no prior history of migration.

A census of all households in the locality found that there were now 1303 people resident in 328 households.⁷ Of these 288 were Muslim and the remaining 40 were Hindu, belonging to the formerly untouchable Namasudra caste. Fifty-one households lived as joint families with more than one generation of married/ once married adults eating from the same hearth. These households included elderly parents living with their married sons, abandoned daughters who had moved back to their natal home, and widows living with a married son. Just as there had been a difference between landed and landless households in the earlier study, the findings had also suggested that households with higher ratios of wage earners to dependents, often but not always joint families, were more likely than households with just one wage earner to be able to use earnings from temporary labour migration on their own terms, for example to make lump sum expenditures whether in micro-businesses, on the land, for weddings or festivals. We wanted to explore the role of household structure more extensively in the second study.

Almost all households in the locality were involved in agricultural work in some way, whether through their own cultivation, wage work for others, or a combination of the two. The soil of the locality is sandy-alluvial with low water-retentive capacity. As recently as 1980, there was no groundwater irrigation. Low-lying lands were cultivated with monsoonal paddy, jute and pulses. Yields were very low.⁸ The agricultural revolution in the locality was led by investment in private shallow tubewells. Over the decade of the 1980s, the cropping pattern changed, with a decline in jute and in traditional *bhadoi* varieties of paddy and the growth of high yielding paddy varieties and wheat. Whereas prior to the change there had been a long fallow period in the winter months, multiple cropping was now widespread. Highly profitable chilli cultivation was also practiced on some land. Landowning households, and those which had become wealthy out of renting water to others from shallow tubewells gained the most from the agricultural changes. At the same time there was insufficient local work for poor, landless households to survive.

⁷ A household is defined in this study as a domestic group sharing food cooked at a common hearth.

⁸ For example, the yield of paddy was reported to have increased from 5 maunds per bigha in 1980 to 20 maunds per bigha in 2005 (interview with Sekh Sayub, key informant, 27 August 2005). All names have been changed in this paper.

Thus individuals and households combined different sources of livelihood. This continued to be the case in 2005. For example, Rakeeb cultivated three bighas (0.4 ha) of land and supplemented this by trading in straw using his cycle rickshaw van throughout the year. Lobu, who had slightly more land (0.52 ha), hired out his plough and his own labour and engaged in the cattle trade from time to time. Tarjen, a long time seasonal migrant, was now only able to earn by begging. Yet, while a majority (56 per cent) of households continued to be primarily reliant on wage work (see Table 1 below), there were major changes. Firstly, while in 1999-2000 very little paid work other than chilli harvesting was done by women because of gender ideologies which militated against their employment as wage workers for others, more women were employed in wage work five years on. Secondly, migrant wage workers entered a much broader range of occupations.

Table 1: Primary Occupation of Jalpara Households in June/July 2005

Primary Occupation	Number of Households
Hiring out labour for wage work	185
Cultivation	53
Trade in seasonal products (vegetables, mangos, cooking oil, spices, molasses)	28
Begging	24
Straw trading using cycle rickshaw vans	17
Trading in fish	6
Rent receiving	4
Barber	2
Agricultural input business	2
Government job	2
Livestock rearing	1
Money lending	1
Unqualified medical practitioner	1
Stitching	1
Tea stall	1
Total	328

Source: Census of Jalpara locality (fieldwork data), July 2005

Note: The primary occupation here refers to the household's greatest single source of income (cash and own-account production combined)

3. The Changing Pattern of Temporary Migration from Jalpara

Of 230 households enumerated in the locality in 2005, seventy per cent included at least one person who had at some point in their lives, and in many cases repeatedly, migrated to earn money. As in 1999-2000, for a large proportion of people, migration was a response to poverty, landlessness and the lack of local jobs. However, the range of sectors that migrants found work

in had expanded. Labour contractors had become involved, where they had not been before, and women as well as men migrated for wage work outside the district. Because of the rapid expansion of telephone use, it was now easier for migrants to send news about their whereabouts and well-being as well as current conditions in the labour market to their families and others in the village. This section draws on interviews with migrants and others in Jalpara to explore these changes in more detail.

In 1999-2000, most work migration had been for agricultural work in the West Bengal districts of Bardhaman, Nadia and Birbhum. Most of this work involved transplanting or harvesting in one or both of the two annual rice crops. Seasons lasted between ten days and one month. In 2005, rice work was still a major source of employment for migrants. However, some former agricultural wage workers had moved into migration for begging and trade, and potato harvesting had emerged as a new source of outside work.

Unlike before, women were migrating for wage work. One woman, Ajija, who had been involved in begging for a living, claimed she had discovered the potato harvest jobs. She had been begging in the area and noticed that there were less workers available than growers required. She took another (male) villager from Jalpara with her the next time she went and he later introduced gangs of workers to the place. The potato harvesting season lasts for one month from mid February to mid March.

Of the twenty-seven individuals whose life histories were recorded, five were from households with women who regularly hired out labour. All of these women worked as chilli harvesters locally or in nearby villages. One, Habiba Bibi, had been migrating regularly since 2000 for the harvest of both rice and potatoes. She would go with her brothers and one sister.

Habiba Bibi told us how she started migrating:

I studied up to class two. We were poor. We had nothing to eat. In my childhood I worked with mother at home. I went to harvest chillies too, load paddy and collect firewood. Now I migrate to Bardhaman. When I first went, five women went in all, along with several men. I took my younger brother with me and we stayed for ten to twelve days, harvesting potatoes. It happened when neighbours were going round [putting together a gang] and I told them 'take me, take me'. I can't do paddy transplanting but I've been going every year since then in Kartik

[October-November] for the *aman* [monsoonal] paddy harvest. Here in the village you earn Rs 25 per day. It is eaten and is finished. When I migrate, I get a lot of money and work. I earn Rs 1000.

Another woman, Liki Bibi, the wife of Mobin (see next section) migrated for the first time in 2005. This was for potato harvesting. She went with Mobin and her six-year-old child. She earned Rs 400 for ten days work, the same as her husband, but she was not sure she would go again, both because she got sick while she was there and because she was now generally feeling unwell.

I migrated in Falgun [February-March 2005] for potato harvesting. We went in a train at first and then in a bus. I took a train ticket for Rs 35. Two of the children stayed back at home and my mother-in-law looked after them. At the destination there were problems with food and living conditions. There was no [proper accommodation]; we had to live under bamboos [in a bivouac]. I had to take my own utensils with me for cooking. Two other women went from this village along with me. Whether I will go again this year or not is difficult to tell. I think I won't go as I have been very sick this time. With the Rs 400 that I earned from potato harvest work, I bought medicine. I was sick at that time because of pain in my appendix.

In contrast to 1999-2000, many of those who migrated in 2005 did non-agricultural wage work too. Migration for brick kiln work grew and workers found employment in previously unexplored sectors, including construction of buildings in Kolkata, road building, and digging trenches for the laying of telephone wires.

Some of this change occurred in the aftermath of the catastrophic flood, which took place at the end of 2000, soon after Rafique left the locality (see Rafique 2003 and Chapman and Rudra 2002). Several of those interviewed in 2005 spoke of the suffering caused by the flood and the inadequate and unevenly distributed relief. For example, Sabrina, 24, lived in one of the few brick buildings:

I was here and many of my relatives were with me because this [area of land] did not get submerged. Many of the villagers were here. Even my father was here. Everyone came. [My father] brought rice and other provisions with him. After eight days, when the flood subsided they all went back to their homes...It was at two am that people were warning us that the water may rise anytime and wash us away. Many people saw their cattle carried away by the water

current. People could not do anything because they feared for their lives.... So many people got money... but we did not get anything. In our [neighbourhood] two people were given money.

The immediate food shortage caused poor households in Jalpara to seek any paid work they could find, and there was much less work for migrants in agriculture, because many of the usual destination areas had experienced the same devastation. Unsurprisingly, kinship networks were important in finding work in other sectors. For example, Sabbir Mia contacted his sister's husband's elder brother in a village fifteen kilometres away, whom he knew to be a labour contractor. Similarly, Jamal's mother explained that 'the son-in-law of the next door neighbour is a mason and worked in Kolkata'. He was taking his *sala* (wife's brother) with him and asked Jamal whether he wanted to come too. Jamal agreed.

Contractors were especially important for finding road-building and earth-digging work in the post-flood period. However, they could not always be relied on. Two workers reported experiences of being cheated.⁹ Samsed talked about his son, who 'went to work in road construction last year but left after just a few days. He did not get paid; the middleman digested the money. I have not allowed him to go for road-building work since.'

Rasheed migrated for road-building work with a contractor from Kalukhali, a nearby village. He alleged there had been collusion between the contractor and the police. He told us that when he returned home from the work, only a part of the amount owed him was paid. A couple of months later, he had gone to Lalbagh with another worker, Ajj. There they found the contractor and an associate and took them forcibly to Jalpara, where the contractor was kept hold of, while his associate was allowed to go off and explain the situation to the contractor's other associates. Rasheed and Ajj hoped that in this way they would receive what was owed to them. Instead, the contractor's associates went to the police, who came to Rasheed's house, released the contractor and took the two workers to a police station where they were beaten up. About twenty residents of Jalpara went to the police station to get the pair released. The police negotiated a compromise whereby Rasheed was paid Rs 400 of the Rs 1200 owed to him. He believes that the contractor bribed the police.

⁹ This is not uncommon for migrants as was found in the earlier study. See also Start and Deshingkar 2006: 204-5.

The demand side of the labour market was also a major cause of change in the pattern of employment of migrant workers. The largely public investment in infrastructure accounted for work such as making roads or digging trenches for telephone wires.

I migrated to Kolkata and worked at an electric power station. We dug big bore holes there and filled in other ones. Once I worked there for forty days. The second time was for thirty-eight days. Other people would come from home [Jalpara] for two to four days. Through them I used to send money to my family (Ajinul Sah).

There was a simultaneous boom in the private construction of buildings. The increase in demand for construction workers was especially high in India's cities, particularly its four metropolitan cities, which include West Bengal's state capital, Kolkata.¹⁰ The impression gained from migrants' stories was that such was the current demand for construction workers in Kolkata, it was not difficult to find work in that sector, and previous connections were not necessary. As Ramjan, aged 24, put it: 'Even if you don't have any contacts, you don't need them to get a job on a Kolkata building site. One can easily find lots of construction going on here and there. If you approach one of these sites, you can get taken on.'

Another migrant, Samsuddin, aged 22, says:

At first I migrated in a temper. There had been an argument at home. I left home and caught a Kolkata bound train at Topedanga. I got down at Sealdah and followed the flow of people going out of the station. Then I wandered around. I found some construction work going on and some people who were working there. I approached them and asked 'will you take me on'? They said 'yes'. I joined them. This was about two years ago and since then I have been working with the same employer [whenever I go].

One of the most dramatic changes in labour market functioning between 1999 and 2005 was the arrival of telephones in Jalpara. In the monsoonal rice harvest in 2005, five of the twenty-four bands or gangs that were formed to seek work away from home found work through making calls. This may signify a decline in the use of labour market places which had been found to be characteristic of migration from this area in the earlier study. The phone had also

¹⁰ See, for example, Gidwani 2006. Other non-metropolitan studies have, however, revealed a major role for contractors. For example, a recent study of migrant construction workers in Kerala found workers from Malda District in West Bengal to have been recruited through complex sub-contracting chains (Prasad 2006). As the author points out, this migration is relatively recent.

now become a rapid means of passing information between migrants and those staying behind. For example, one migrant returned early, having called home and found out that his wife was sick, and that the price of straw was going up fast. Straw was a key input for his local work as a ploughman.

Thus, whereas six years earlier, there had been little migration for wage work other than for transplanting and harvesting rice, and very few people travelled to work in informal brick-making units, by 2005-06 migration for brick kiln work had expanded, as also had migration for urban construction work, and for road-building and other earth work. Migration for wage work in agriculture continued to be very important. At the same time, as we have seen, the types of agricultural work performed by migrant workers increased to include potato harvesting and jute drying. Travelling and staying away from home to beg, which was not included within the definition of migration in the earlier study, and to trade, which was, have continued to be important sources of livelihood for some people.

4. Migration and Livelihood Histories

In this section, we draw on the life histories of three male residents of Jalpara to illustrate some of the diversity of ways in which temporary migration has formed part of the livelihoods of poor people in the locality. The histories also show how causes and consequences of migration interweave and change over an individual's life course.¹¹ The cases are taken from each of the three categories of migration dynamics adopted in the study:

- i) households with at least one member who continues to migrate at some point in the year (continuing migrant households);
- ii) households with one or more members who migrated previously but no longer do so (ex-migrant households); and
- iii) households from which no one has ever migrated (never-migrant households).

Case of a Continuing Migrant Household

Mobin Shekh was 38 when he was interviewed in 2005. He lives with his wife and three children (two sons and a daughter, all under the age of eleven). They have no land, nor any

¹¹ This is also closely connected to movement across the life cycle of the household.

livestock. Mobin's wife occasionally engages in wage work. Like many other women in the locality, she hand processes paddy into rice for the household's consumption. Mobin started migrating for work in rice transplanting and harvesting since he was a teenager, and continued to do so. However, the reasons behind his 'migration choices' have changed dramatically.

I started going to school when I was seven. I didn't have suitable shorts so I started a [local] job grazing goats. After eight days in the job my eldest brother asked me to give it up and offered to buy me the shorts. As a result I was able to continue studying. I still used to hire out labour on Sundays weeding the chilli fields. When I was studying in class six my mind changed. I left my study and started doing wicked things (*aami badmasi suru karlam*). My brother tried to make me go back to school but I wouldn't go. So, in a temper he took me with him [as a seasonal migrant] to harvest monsoonal rice [in Bardhaman district]. I had no choice but to accompany him. After some days of work I had diarrhoea. My brother and I were working for different employers but one of the other migrants in my group told my brother that my condition was becoming serious. 'Let him die' my brother said. My colleague tried to persuade him to be more sympathetic: 'If he dies, what would you do? Could you take him back home?' My brother relented: 'If you are willing to continue your study, take the wages due to you and one hundred rupees from me and go home.'

Mobin was readmitted in class six but dropped out after two more years.

This was partly because of the bad company [I was keeping] and partly because I could not buy English and Mathematics books. I started hiring out labour [to local employers] more regularly. The second time I migrated I was in a huff. I had wanted a wristwatch and my mother had refused to buy me one. So I left for the Bardhaman rice harvest telling her that I would only return when I had enough money for a watch.

[My wife and I] lived with my parents for two years after getting married. When we separated from them, nothing was given to us. We had to buy everything we needed for living only gradually. I have nothing in my hands, only trees under the open sky (*aamar hatey kichhu nei, aamar hatey khola dal-pala*). Last *Asarh* (June-July) we passed the nineteenth anniversary of our marriage. I still go to foreign places (*bidesh*) for paddy transplanting and harvesting. I have also migrated to work in a brick kiln twice and a construction site once. If I don't go, how will we live (*sansar chalbe ki kare*)?

Mobin's migration over these years of marriage and children has been closely linked to debt and credit relations, in particular regarding dowry, marriage costs, jewellery, and the cost of accessing health care:

I married in Jalpara. As dowry I received a bicycle worth Rs 700, Rs 1100 in cash, gold earrings and a gold ring. Nevertheless, I had to borrow a further Rs 700 to cover the cost of the marriage feast. Later we pawned the earrings and used the proceeds to lease in a micro-plot of land and cultivate chilli and wheat. The chilli fetched a low-price and the wheat yield was very low. At that time the pawn-broker asked whether we wanted to release the earrings. We did not have the money. But my brother's sister had sold a cow and had saved the money. My brother used that money to retrieve the ornament which meant that it permanently left our household's possession....

Having been married for three years we pawned the ring for Rs 800. I planned to get it back using migration remittances. I earned Rs 832 and lent Rs 100 of it to a neighbour. I needed Rs 950 for the pawn-broker but did not have sufficient funds. My neighbour gave all his earnings to his mother, who refused to pay the Rs 100 that was owed to me. I did not have enough to get the ring back so spent the remittances repaying the loan of Rs 700 I had taken for the marriage feast. At present I have nothing to pawn except a bicycle that would bring in around Rs 200. I owe a total of Rs 1800 to three different shops....

The doctor I owe money to does not pursue me to repay the debt. Rather if we shyly turn down our heads when passing him on the road, he greets us and inquires after our health. My wife is sick and needs an operation. A private hospital demanded Rs 2500 for the operation. However, we were not able to raise the money. The same doctor offered to lend us Rs 500 but we couldn't raise Rs 2000 either. In a government hospital the operation would be free but I would have to buy all the medicines. My wife is often sick and a lot of money has been spent on her treatment. For the last six or seven years I have not been able to buy medicine for myself, though on my last migration for transplanting I was not feeling well.

These selected passages from the taped interview with Mobin reveal changes from a first migration that was insisted on by his elder brother, through rebellious youthful migration, to an adulthood of migration to service multiple debt and credit relations. As this household's assets, particularly jewellery, have been pawned and they have not managed to retrieve them, this has been a downward spiral economically. For Mobin and his family, there has not yet been any way out of this cycle. He told us that last time the season for migration for monsoonal rice

transplanting came he did not feel well enough to go. He was finally persuaded by a number of neighbours, one of whom lent him Rs 50 for his travel expenses. Importantly, the eleven kilograms of rice the children received at school as part of the noon meals scheme played an important part in how the rest of the household managed in Mobin's absence. They also sought to borrow rice through Mobin's mother, a strategy which did not succeed and ended in a quarrel. The two households are not on speaking terms any more. These incidents raise important questions for our analysis of the role of informal support and formal social protection (see Section 5 below).

Case of an Ex-migrant Household

Hamidul Sekh was in his mid thirties at the time of the interview and, like Mobin, also owned no land. However, though previously reliant on wages earned as a migrant, Hamidul had not migrated for seven years. He had managed to rent a cycle rickshaw van and subsequently earned money through straw trading. He lived with his wife, also a non-migrant and two children, a boy, aged twelve and a girl, aged ten. Hamidul's story illustrates a change over his life course from migrating out from lack of alternatives to using social networks, credit and remittances to find a viable alternative to migration for wage work.

My parents did not educate me at all. There was a school in the village but I know almost nothing. If you ask me to write with a pen I won't be able to. I was never admitted to school. If you ask me to do some work then I can, including cultivation work. I can do work with things that I see.

At the time of my birth my father became paralysed. My mother had received four bighas (0.4 ha) of land from her mother. She sold it to pay for household expenses [as my father could not earn] and for my father to get medical help. My mother also started to beg from close relatives. My father too became involved in begging riding on a horse-drawn cart.

When I was around ten I grazed the household's goats. I was one of four brothers and the eldest one grazed goats for another household. When our goats died I roamed around collecting firewood. When I was twelve I started to hire out labour. I worked weeding chilli, jute and mustard seeds. As I got older I learned more skills, including jute-washing and the construction of mud houses which I also did as wage work. I also got married when I was

twelve. My mother had visited a friend's house, had seen a girl she thought attractive and arranged the marriage there and then.

When I was about fifteen my parents asked to migrate to Bardhaman for the monsoonal rice harvest. Perhaps I wouldn't have gone if they hadn't asked me to. I stayed for fifteen to sixteen days. There was no work in the village at that time. How long could we keep sitting idle? The stomach should [have something to] run [on]. That is why people are going.

I have to say good things about *bidesh* [the foreign, destination, area] even if it is bad. I used to go to transplant monsoonal paddy, but not summer paddy. The first time I migrated my feelings about migration were good. The next time they were good too. But after that I started feeling bad. Employers started to create problems about the amount of work. They would say things like 'you haven't done enough work', 'you haven't worked hard enough' or 'why did you not do such and such....' The food was bad. But even though it was bad we had to think of it as good and eat it. Why would [we expect them to] serve food like ours? We had to clean the ground in the place where we had eaten food.

I stopped migrating for agricultural work and started migrating to a brick field in Islampur. I found that earnings were higher in the brick fields. I did not make bricks but prepared the mud which others made bricks out of. I continued going to the brick field for work and staying there until seven years ago. Once I migrated to Kolkata. I was asked to work painting the inside of houses with whitewash. I suffered burns on my leg from lime.

Hamidul then talked about the drama of his journey home:

In Sealdah station [at Kolkata] I asked someone where the ticket counter was. He wanted to know where I was going. When I told him, he said he was going in the same direction. He claimed to be in a group and that he had a reserved compartment. 'If you want to travel in that compartment you don't need to buy a ticket. Instead you can pay us directly for a much lower fare.' I accepted this offer and boarded the train. When the ticket inspector came to check tickets, the man turned out not to have one. We were taken to a room where I told the inspector the whole story and was released while the man was kept for further questioning. I boarded the train again where two or three people surrounded me threateningly demanding to know why I had told the inspector everything. I was frightened and managed to get down from the train at the next station and tell the railway people. They told the duty railway police officer on the train. After the police left I was threatened by the same people. I jumped off the train just as it was leaving the station and took a lift with a lorry headed towards Baharampur.

Once I migrated to sell mangos. I was sitting in the train station for a while and bought some tea. After drinking the tea I started feeling unwell and headed for home. [Five kilometres from Jalpara] I fell down and lost consciousness. People in that area knew who I was and sent a message to my family. My mother came with the leader (*morol*) of our village group (*sama*) and some other people. They took me to hospital at Lalbagh. When the doctor saw me he said that he wouldn't treat me because I was in too serious a condition. However, the *morol* fell at the doctor's feet [and implored him to treat me]. The doctor admitted me to the hospital and prescribed some injections. I started responding positively. The *morol* paid the money for this treatment, though I paid it back later. He looks after me like a son. He has never thrown me out. He is our *morol* and owns twenty-five bighas [3.2 ha].

When I hired out labour I only managed to fill my stomach, nothing else (*pet-ta chalatam ar kichhu hato na*). However, my brother had managed to get access to a cycle rickshaw van. My brother's friend's brother owned a cycle rickshaw van shop. The shopkeeper offered me a van on credit on a daily hire basis. I would pay for it from the earnings. Encouraged by my brother I accepted the offer. Now by pulling the rickshaw van I can cover all my household expenses and make some savings.

I [use the van to] purchase straw from surrounding villages and sell it in small towns such as Lalgola and Bhagawangola. Sometimes I return the same day and sometimes not. If I set out in the morning I reach the place where I buy the straw around 1.30 or 2pm. Sometimes I come home at that point, other times not. If not, I take shelter in an unused veranda. Then, on the next day, after selling the straw I return home. If I purchase one thousand bundles of paddy at Rs 300-350, I can sell them at Rs 500-550.

After saving something from van pulling I started to offer to mortgage others' land. I still managed the cash needs of our household through my van-pulling work. I was able to save the whole crop that I cultivated and afford a larger area of land. I've been renting land in this way for the last six years. I am also cultivating some land that the mosque has leased in on the side of the pond. They offered me use of the land if I made it pliable. With another man I took on this work and we are entitled to cultivate this land for three years without paying rent. It is approximately half a bigha. We cultivate aubergines on that land and sell it.

Now I have bought a cow. It is currently producing one litre of milk per day which I sell for Rs 10. I have some friends in the village who are also van pullers. If I am ever short of money now I would go to my friends. If they have the money they'll lend it to me.

Hamidul, like Mobin, began to migrate out on the instruction of a relative and continued to migrate out of economic necessity. He became a reluctant migrant, objecting in particular to the employer-worker hierarchy and switching from agricultural work to brick kilns. With even less formal education, but better luck and networking skills than Mobin, Hamidul managed to find a livelihood which did not involve going away for weeks at a time. The cycle rickshaw van pulling has enabled him to invest in agricultural production too and has enabled him to stop wage labour migration altogether.

Case of an (Almost) Never Migrant Household

Pear was fifty-one when he was interviewed. He lived in a joint family household with his wife, married son and daughter-in-law, two further sons and two daughters. The livelihood of his household was based around the cultivation of 9.5 bighas (1.2 ha) of land as well as working for others. Thus Pear has had experience of hiring out labour as well as hiring it in. But in his case migration for wage work was used only in a time of extreme food scarcity thirty years ago. His livelihood has never been based around a pattern of migration. Pear himself is now a *morol* (local leader).

When I was five years old my father became paralysed. He had had a fight with someone in a Hindu para about the position of an *aa* [raised border of a piece of land]. The other man threatened my father saying that 'if I can't fight with my body I will get you in another way'. Gradually we forgot all about it. However, after six months we realised that the man had cursed my father. He was sleeping in bed at night and felt pain in his knee. The pain became stronger and stronger and his leg heavier. He became bed ridden.

We managed our family through my mother's work, processing rice from paddy. There were eight of us then. We would bring paddy home one maund [40 kg] at a time and my mother would make rice from that and sell it in 1 kg and 1.5 kg batches. I was sometimes sent to eat in others' houses and to graze cattle. Sometimes I worked in others' fields harvesting chilli. My mother did that work too. Things were very hard then (*khub durdanto abastha chhilo takhan*). It was just after chilli had been introduced by refugees from Bangladesh.

When I was seven or eight years old I started to graze cattle for another household. I was paid in food, shorts and a vest but no wage. I worked for that household for about three years. When

we sold our land we bought cows and I reared them. When I was thirteen or fourteen I made a plough. I learned to plough and started hiring it out. The wage rate for ploughing was Rs 2 to 2.30 per day. With that money we would buy rice and pay for other household expenses. Nothing was saved.

I have experienced great hardship. However now He [Allah] gives us happiness. The shortage of food was so bad when I was 17-18. At that time I had to labour day and night. I had to wait in the employer's house in the hope that they would employ me. We would think to ourselves 'now he will ask, now he will ask'. This would happen every moment. If the employer gave us food during the day, we would have to watch over their pumpset in the field at night. Sometimes they would decide not to employ us, just saying: 'Don't come tomorrow'. Then they would employ someone else. We were full of fear. It was at this time that I decided to migrate out for wage work, weeding and harvesting jute near Ranaghat from mid-May to mid-July

We had some land which had been sharecropped out and as I had learned cultivation skills we were able to take that land back and we started to prosper. After a while we began to cultivate wheat. We saved when we could and eventually were able to have a shallow tube-well installed. After saving more money, we were able to buy a pumpset so we no longer had to rent that. This was about twenty-four years ago.

Over time we have been able to buy more land. I have done this in small instalments. Presently I have 9.5 bighas. I hire in labour for cultivation. At transplanting I contract out the work, paying Rs 200 per bigha with food. For harvesting the rate is Rs 300 per bigha including cutting, binding and threshing the paddy. Nowadays we have to comply with the labourers (*benyer sangei saath karte hochey amaderkey*). They are happier than us. Labour is not available for both the first and second part of the day. If we ask them to work in the second part of the day they do not agree.

As a *morol* I have to look after the interests of the group. If somebody is in trouble, for example if somebody in [one of the households in the *sama*] has died, then I have to go. If they can't afford the costs associated with death then I approach other households for subscriptions. I have to rescue the situation, arrange the bamboos that are required. Apart from this when there is a marriage I am given the responsibility of making all arrangements.

As these extracts show, Pear has experienced life both as an employer and a labourer but almost never as a migrant. Nevertheless, being in a relatively well off household now did not

mean he had not experienced hardship earlier in life. The time he migrated, about thirty-four years before the interview, was a time of need. Pear had migrated on his own volition, unlike Mobin and Hamidul. But he used his continuing ability to get work as a ploughman and the wealth generated through agriculture to avoid migrating again.

5. Informal Support and the Livelihoods of Those Staying Behind

Almost all of the temporary migration from Jalpara involves split households with one or occasionally more members, usually men, migrating, and others, usually women and children, staying behind. Household livelihoods are then stretched across space (Samuels 2001). Managing livelihoods back home in the absence of the migrant is particularly challenging because the person migrating is often the main earner, and it may have been possible to leave only a few kilograms of rice behind. The experience varies according to the wealth of the household (particularly whether they have land of their own) and its size and structure (some households have more than one wage earner with at least one staying behind). The duration of migration ranges from one week to several months with very different implications for those managing livelihoods back home. Finally, there are a range of potential changes to gender relations. For example, as other studies have shown, women can experience emancipation through greater autonomy where the power balance within the household had been skewed towards men. All these variables will be the subject of further analysis. Here space permits us only to begin to illustrate some of the ways in which women staying behind seek to secure livelihoods through drawing on social relations with other households.

Staying behind in the absence of the male member, irrespective of the above variations, is challenging. Women staying behind experienced anxiety and fear regarding the health and well-being of family members including, in some cases especially, with regard to the person who had migrated. Because the number of adults responsible for day-to-day household management had temporarily declined, often by half, there was a completely different dynamic to ensuring food was adequate, arranging the cash that was needed, doing reproductive work, including travelling away from the homestead, and responding to any sickness among those staying behind. Often there would be a greater reliance on support from others via kin and other social relations.

But drawing on social networks, including kin, for food and other support depended on accessibility of kin, and the type of relationship maintained (including degrees of affection and/or ongoing conflicts). Since cross cousin marriage is a common practice among Muslims in Jalpara, women often lived close both to their natal homes and to their husbands' families (Rogaly and Rafique 2003). Women who did live near their mother would tend to choose them as a first port of call rather than their mother-in-law. However, the nature of the relationship determined from whom and the extent to which informal support was sought. Maruba Bibi whose natal home was in another nearby village, but whose mother-in-law resided in an adjacent house, relied on her friend, Sanwara, for most of her needs. This is because at the time of her marriage she stayed in a joint family with her parents-in-law, and the relationship had deteriorated because she had not brought any dowry with her. Similarly, Manwari Bibi who lived near both her mother's and her mother-in-law's homes preferred to approach her mother rather than her mother-in-law for help. She too said that her mother-in-law was more affectionate towards her younger son's family because his wife had received some land as dowry at the time of marriage. Joyanti, whose natal home was very far from the village and whose in-laws are no longer alive, relied most on her *bhagini pou* (husband's sister's son) who lived in an adjacent house.

Managing Access to Food, Cash and Health Care

In order to manage the amount of food available for consumption, adjustments were made to make that food last longer, for example by reducing the frequency of cooking. Joyanti Haldar, who cooked twice a day, once at 9 am and then at 2 pm, when her husband was around, cooked only once a day, at around 4pm, when her husband was away doing rice work. Similarly when her husband was at home, Manwari Bibi made sure that her three school going children ate in the morning before they left, so she cooked at 8 am and then again in the afternoon. When her husband was away for the transplanting of monsoonal rice in 2005, she started cooking at 4pm and served hot food to the children when they returned home after school. In spite of such management, food stocks ran out and shortages emerged. At such times, women would draw on their social networks for support.

Although cash was needed to buy vegetables on a weekly basis and in case food stocks ran out, the largest expenses were incurred when someone fell ill or had an ongoing requirement for medication. As with food stocks, woman had some cash left behind with them but this

usually amounted to very little. For example, while Sabrina, whose husband migrated away to Orissa to do construction work in November 2005 and did not return until early January 2006, had Rs 200 with her to meet any unforeseen expenses, Maruba was left with just Rs 50 when her husband went to the brick kilns. Indeed while Maruba's husband was away she had to deal with a situation of urgent medical need when her two-year-old son developed jaundice.

Sickness and health are year-round preoccupations. Joyanti has two daughters, aged three and one. While her husband was in Bardhaman for rice transplantation (in the monsoonal, *aman*, season), her younger daughter got very sick with a prolonged fever. Joyanti had no money at home so she approached her husband's nephew (*bhagini pou*, husband's sister's son) for some cash. While taking the money she told her *bhagini pou*, 'I will repay you when your [her husband] uncle comes back'.

During her husband's absence in Orissa, Sabrina had to spend money for the treatment of a cyst on her hand. She needed Rs 20 for her weekly visits to the doctor. The Rs 200 that her husband had left her ran out in one week. Later she borrowed another Rs 100 from her sister-in-law who lived near by. Her sister-in-law is also her first cousin (father's sister's daughter). She needed the money not only for her own medical expenses but also to spend 'in *haat* (market) for vegetables, and for salt and oil in the village shop'.

Cash arrangements were not always limited to borrowing. Often those staying behind sought wage employment. In some cases they were employed by relatively well-off kin, who were able to give them wage work. For example, Subera Bibi's husband had migrated for brick kiln work to Farakka in November 2005. On the day Massey visited her house, her husband had been away for twenty-two days and she was expecting him to return the next day. However, Subera had decided to do some wage work as her food stocks had completely run out. She approached her father-in-law who owned cultivable land and started picking green chilli in his fields. As it turned out, her husband did not return for another week. In another case, Noorjahan Bibi who was 58 years old, and lived with her recently married son, Ansar, and daughter-in-law, approached her brother who owned 10 bighas of land and was hired to harvest green chilli in his fields. She had sent her daughter-in-law to her natal home during this period.

In contrast, for Liki Bibi, getting wage work proved a much more onerous task. Although she had two brothers who lived nearby, and who owned land and cultivated chilli, they would not employ their sister. She needed money to buy vegetables and also to meet medical expenses for treatment of an infection in her appendix. She therefore sought work with an employer she had earlier worked for in a village five kilometres away, leaving for work at 4 am and returning at noon everyday. However, on days she suffered from pain in her appendix, she could not go. She said that she harvested chilli only when her husband was away because that was the hardest time for the family: 'Poor life... have to go... there is no salt and oil... Children will have something, that's what he [referring to her husband] says. Poor people's life... two of us have to struggle'. She would harvest between fifteen and twenty kilograms of chillies in a day and was paid one rupee per kilo.

If there were no kin to hire them, women and other members of the household somehow still had to find wage work. Harvesting chilli was the most common paid employment that women and children engaged in. The chilli harvest season lasts for three months, starting from mid-September to mid-December, overlapping with seasonal migration for the monsoonal rice harvest and to the brick kilns. So in households where members migrated seasonally for these two kinds of work, those staying behind often worked harvesting chilli. Getting work in the fields of kin within the village was very common.

These cases shed light on an often neglected aspect of migration by poor, vulnerable households: the livelihoods of household members who remain behind. In Jalpara, where gender ideologies, and the seasonality of the chilli crop, mean that wage work for women remains very limited, the struggle to get by in the absence of male earners can be particularly intense. Many women staying behind have to rely on hard work and on maintaining and negotiating relations with kin and other contacts to keep a minimum level of food and cash coming in. Such relations are also important for accessing health services, and for physical security.

6. Summary and Emerging Questions

This paper has demonstrated both the continuing importance of migration to poor households in Jalpara and their reluctance to engage in it. The arrival of labour contractors and telephones in the village over the six years between 1999 and 2005 has made for a wider range of options

for migrant wage work. Over the same period, migration for trade and for begging have increased in importance and, whereas in 1999 only men migrated for wage work, by 2005 women were involved as well.

The selected passages from three life histories of migrant men, including one who had only migrated once thirty years before the interview, show not only the arduous nature of the work at the destination but also, in the case of Hamidul, the lack of autonomy evident in the employment relations that migrant agricultural workers become involved in. It is not only that men in Jalpara are reluctant migrants; the wives of those who migrate also expressed a combination of resignation to its inevitability and the sense of it being very undesirable. As Joyanti Haldar put it:

He [my husband] migrates because if he stays at home life does not go along well... we do no more than fill our stomachs... but one needs to save some money... that is why he migrates. At the moment... there is no work available in the village.... Both my children are sick; they have fever and medicine is needed... I find rickshaw van pulling much better. At least my husband resides at home, comes home. I am able to see him after one or two days.

The life histories reported in this paper illustrate the complexity of the causes and consequences of temporary migration the people of Jalpara engage in. They suggest that the life course is important in the study of the causes of migration, with causality shifting over time for both Mobin and Hamidul. The precariousness of the rest of the household in the absence of the migrant worker is variable depending, for example, on the length of absence and the amount of cash that remains in the kitty. It also depends on the kinds of relationships that women are able to invest in and maintain. There are important aspects of this in the experience of the migrant worker too, as may be gleaned from the contrast between Hamidul and Mobin. Hamidul has built up a range of good contacts and has also had more luck than Mobin. It is perhaps a combination of these two that has enabled him to stop relying on earnings from migration.

In the ongoing analysis of our data, we will be asking deeper questions about the quality of the relationships migrants and those staying behind draw on for survival and greater livelihood security. Some of these relationships, as this paper has only been able to hint at, are deeply unequal, and even conflictive. Others involve greater collaboration and a more equal

reciprocity. This paper also indicates the existence of some form of formal social protection for migrants' households, as in the case of the midday meals scheme Mobin's household were reliant on. We will be assessing the actual and potential role of this and other forms of public action in further analyses.

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