Desh-Bidesh:
Sylheti Images of Home and Away

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In migrant villages in Sylhet, places, and the images with which they are associated, represent
different and at times competing forms of power. While the ‘homeland’ refers to spirituality and
religiosity, ‘abroad’ is linked to material bounty and economic transformation, and local desire has
become centred on travel abroad as the only route to material prosperity. The ‘imagined’ foreign
worlds of those who have never migrated can therefore be viewed as the ideological concomitant
of international dependency, and their ambivalent relationship with the homeland, a key element
in the cultural contradictions of migration.

In some villages of Sylhet, in northern Bangladesh, women have a special song.
The words of this are strikingly contemporary: ‘How can I accept that my hus-
band has gone to London?’ The women sing, ‘I will fill up a suitcase with dried
fish / All the mullahs – everyone – have gone to London / The land will be
empty – what will I do? / When my brother goes to London he’ll give orders at
the tailor’s / He’ll make a blouse for me / How can I accept that my husband has
gone to London?’

The lyrics reveal more than the empirical fact that many people have migrated
from the area. They are also an introduction to the ethnography of locality in
Sylhet – to people’s representations of different places, and the varying amounts
and types of power with which those places are associated. Rather than the
imagined ‘homelands’ of the migrants, my focus is upon the desired destinations
of those who never leave Sylhet; upon how these destinations are constructed,
and how they become metaphors and symbols for much more than their geo-
graphical referents.

In Sylhet locality is used to discuss both the past and contemporary change and
the future. People’s desires centre on the distant localities of foreign countries,
and foreign power. Those who have never left the homeland long for the self-
imposed exile of the diaspora, for despite the pulls of the homeland, it is only
overseas that economic power and the means to material transformation are
supposed to exist. Locality is also used to describe a range of social and economic
relations. At one level, images of home and abroad refer to inequality between
nations, at another, to local social organisation, for the locality of individuals
ascribes their status and economic position. Images of bidesh – foreign countries –
are also metaphors to aspects of the desh – home. The economic dominance of
families with migrant members has meant that bidesh is associated with success
and power, which the desh is unable to provide. Statements concerning bijesh are therefore part of a discourse about the insecurity of life in Bangladesh and the continual economic struggle which villagers face. Seen in this light, they are an ideological representation of the ‘periphery’s domination by the ‘core’ (Shils 1961). Individual opportunism and enterprise are therefore channelled towards attempting to go abroad, leading to dependency on something which for many is no more than a fantasy, a dream-land, which few villagers will ever see.

Co–existing, sometimes uneasily, with this set of images and ideals is the centrality of desh to group identity, and the spiritual powers with which it is linked. There is therefore a constant balancing of the two views, between the economic and political power of bijesh, and the fertility and spirituality of desh. This continual ambivalence, and negotiation of what might appear to be oppositional presentations of the world, is an integral part of migration and the contradictions which it involves. One way in which such images are expressed and reproduced is through the goods which pass between places. As the song implies, particular commodities are associated with home and abroad. Just as people move between places, so too do material objects, often in the form of gifts. Clearly, migration is a form of exchange, not just of people, but also of goods, images, and ideas.

_Sylhet: a land of migrants_

Sylhet’s experience of overseas migration spans many generations. Since the 1930s and 1940s, with the movement of single men to Britain, small pockets of the district have been profoundly affected by migration. New words have been incorporated into the Sylheti dialect to accommodate this trend; for example, Londoni (those who have migrated to Britain), or entry (a much coveted visa). Although migrants to the Middle East come from all over Bangladesh (Islam et al. 1987), migration to Britain is an overwhelmingly Sylheti phenomenon. Men were employed by British ship companies from the nineteenth century onwards, invariably to perform the most unpleasant tasks on board. Originally, recruitment did not have a particularly regional flavour, but by the 1930s and 1940s Sylhetis were slowly gaining a monopoly, mainly through the fortuitous success of a number of Sylheti sarengs (foremen) who controlled employment and generally favoured their kinsmen and fellow countrymen as employees. Increasingly, ship-workers and their earnings became concentrated in certain communities within Sylhet.

Although work on the ships was punishing, profits were considerable by village standards. One year’s work in a ship’s engine room might enable a man to buy land or build a new house. Many seamen did not confine themselves to the seas, but jumped ship and sought their fortune on dry land. Some smuggled themselves ashore in New York, but many more abandoned ship in the London docks. A small, but steadily increasing population of Sylhetis was thus established in Britain by the 1950s (Adams 1987).

During the 1950s, the numbers increased dramatically (Peach 1990). The post-war British economy demanded cheap and plentiful labour, much of which was recruited from South Asia. Since certain villages in Sylhet already had strong links with the UK, it was from these that most new labour was drawn. It was a clear instance of chain migration; just as ship-workers had helped their kin find work,
so now did British-based Sylhetis help each other to migrate by providing credit, arranging documents, and gradually spreading the network further afield. The demand for labour came mainly from factories in the north, and so it was for industrial cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle that many new migrants were initially destined.

By the late 1960s British industry had declined, and immigrant labour was less in demand. By the 1970s, new laws radically curtailing entrance to Britain had been introduced. But rather than stopping the flow, this precipitated a new form of migration from South Asia (Ballard 1990), for alarmed by the increasing insecurity of their situation, most migrants responded by applying for British passports and sending for their wives and children. And as factory work became less available, many Bengalis switched to catering: the thousands of Bengal Brasseries and Taj Mahal take-aways throughout Britain are testimony to their enterprise (it is worth noting that other South Asian groups are increasingly entering the trade). Since the early days when single men travelled to the West, and returned every couple of years to their villages, things have changed dramatically. Children are now born in Britain, and the notion held by many migrants in the 1960s and 1970s that their stay there was strictly temporary, has increasingly faded.

Although in the UK the 'Bangladeshi community' tends to be portrayed in terms of problems and poverty,¹ in Sylhet, British migrants are usually perceived as successful. This is partly the result of relative standards of living and expectation: to landless villagers in Bangladesh, anyone living in Britain is prosperous. Moreover, the negative stereotype held in the UK is not altogether accurate. Whilst Bengalis in the UK tend to suffer from higher unemployment and greater dependence upon council accommodation than other British South Asians (Carey & Shukur 1985; Peach 1990), this is not altogether surprising, since they are the most recent arrivals from South Asia, and have considerably delayed rates of family reunion (and thus delayed investment in Britain). From the trajectories of British Punjabis, Gujaratis and Mirpuris, it might be supposed that, in time, British Bengalis will catch up.

In fact, in spite of the national statistics, migrant families from Talukpur – where I carried out fieldwork – appear to be doing well. Interestingly, few live in Tower Hamlets, where most Bengali poverty is concentrated; the majority live in Manchester and Newcastle. Some, it is true, are unemployed and cannot afford to return to Bangladesh. Many more, however, own property in Britain, and some own businesses. For them, standards of living are higher and horizons wider than in Bangladesh; they genuinely prefer to live in Britain.

It is this new prosperity which is reflected in the migrants' villages back in Sylhet. Villages which have experienced high levels of Londoni migration are startlingly distinct. Rather than the usual mud and thatch huts, they are filled with stone houses, sometimes two or three storeys high. The migrant villages seem prosperous, with extensive material evidence of their overseas success; a far cry from the impoverishment of the rest of rural Bangladesh. Similar remittance-induced 'booms' have been noted all over Asia (Watson 1975; Kessinger 1979; Ballard 1983).
Thus in village terms, most migrant families have enjoyed considerable success. Many were originally small landowners with enough capital to pay for the initial costs of migration. Usually such costs were very low, but if necessary, kin or neighbours would give loans. The original migrants, whilst rarely the most destitute, were thus by no means the wealthiest. Some were even landless, helped in their migration by the patronage of better-off kin or neighbours. These men returned home rich, investing their earnings in land, the vital commodity upon which the well-being and position of all households in rural Bangladesh depends. Most became moderate or very large landowners, their economic positions transformed.

Correspondingly, those without access to foreign wages have found it increasingly difficult to compete in the struggle for local resources. During the period of most intense migration in the 1960s, when migrants struggled to buy as many fields as possible, local prices rose quickly. Today an acre of land in Sylhet is three or four times more expensive than in other, non-migrant districts. To buy land today, foreign income is crucial. Other price rises in labour, basic commodities and agricultural technology have also contributed, making it increasingly difficult for a small plot to be viable without supporting capital. The processes of land-loss have been well documented for Bangladesh and are as common in Sylhet as elsewhere (Hartman & Boyce 1983; Jansen 1987). But in Londoni villages those with access to foreign wages have vastly increased buying power. High prices offered to owners may have been an incentive for some to sell up, but once landless, they had little chance of reversing their position. In sum, there has been increasing polarisation between the migrants and the non-migrants.

Remittances bought more than just land. They paid for smart new homesteads, education and prestigious religious activities, such as the performance of Hajj, lavish sacrifice, or building a new village mosque. In general, the Londoni families became high-status property owners. Migration has become associated with economic transformation, a means to change a household’s economic position and status in only a few years; in the minds of those who have never migrated, a miracle.

This attitude is illustrated by competition to gain access to a new form of labour migration, to the Middle East. Since the 1970s, many Sylhetis have left for the Persian Gulf, usually to work as labourers in the construction industry, servants, or street vendors. Some risk much to get there. Those who can afford it, buy visas and work contracts. These too, like the Londonis, may find rich pickings. Others enter illegally and live in fear of being caught by the police and deported. In the desperation to migrate, men are willing to sell their small and treasured patches of land, or to take loans which they can never repay. Many are deported before they have begun to earn enough to make it all worthwhile. Others are cheated of their money by unscrupulous brokers who give them false papers and then disappear. Some fall prey to cheats not once but several times, and end up landless. If asked why they persist, they will shrug their shoulders and proclaim: ‘Only those with family abroad ever have any chance in life. We have to keep on trying’.

This attitude, which prioritises migration above everything else and prompts some households to risk their livelihood in attempts to gain access to remittances,
involves a belief in foreign countries as the source of all bounty, the means to
transformation. And it is this which brings me back to my main theme: local
representations of place and of power.

*Desh, people, and self*

In Talukpur, it is hardly surprising that locality is central, both in determining
individuals’ current social and economic positions, and in their future life-
chances. Like so many of the communities surrounding it, Talukpur is a *Londoni*
village. Of the seventy households, only twenty-six were not involved in migra-
tion. Of the forty-four migrant households, twenty-nine had members in the
UK, and several households had members in USA or Germany. Forty-two men
(though the younger brothers of *Londonis*) were also in the Middle East. Incidence
of migration in a household, especially to Britain, usually coincides with higher
standards of living, higher status and land-ownership.

Local people explain economic differences within the village by reference to
the apparent dichotomy between *bidesh* and *desh*. *Desh* and *bidesh* are not, how-
ever, simply polar opposites, involving economic power at the latter, and
powerlessness at the former. Instead, local mental maps involve a geography of
power, in which locations are points along a continuum, with different types of
empowerment to be found at each. To explore this further, we must delve more
deeply into local meanings of locality. As we shall see, rather than being physical,
places are inherently social.

In rural Bangladesh there is great preoccupation with the location of people
and their movements between places. People are categorised by their location,
and referred to in terms of their geographic backgrounds: villagers are *Londonis,*
*bideshis,* *Comilla lok* (people from Comilla District), and so on. Just as people are
defined by their *desh*, social events and particular individuals can influence the
image of a particular place. In Talukpur, for example, many homesteads are
known as *Londoni bari,* and one is referred to as *Sareng bari* (homestead of the
ship’s foreman). *Desh* is more than just a physical mass of land, trees and rivers; it
is the locus of one’s social group. ‘Home’ is where one’s kinsfolk are. It is also
defined on a sliding scale, since the social group with which someone is identified
alters according to the context of definition. *Desh* can mean nation state, region,
village or homestead.

Individuals are tied to their *desh* as much as to their social group, the defini-
tions of which also shift in scale (from household members, to all Bengalis).
Although people acquire status through their association with another *desh* (i.e.
Britain or Saudi Arabia), their own *desh* remains the same. Regardless of how
long they have been away, migrants always belong to their home village, or
rather, to the social group which is located in the village.

Given the centrality of *desh* to individual and group identity, it is not surprising
that great efforts are made to bury the dead there. Migrants who can afford it are
flown back to Sylhet for burial and to be seen for the last time by their family.
Landowners are buried in their own fields, the plot being marked by bushes and
bamboo fences. The landscape of Sylhet is thus made social by the graves and
shrines scattered across it. It is correspondingly strengthened and empowered by
the spiritual power (sakti) transferred to it by the remains of the dead: the more spiritual the deceased, the stronger this effect is thought to be.

Related to the social nature of the land, is the notion that by consuming its produce, one becomes part of the desh, in turn, strengthened and empowered by it. Daniel (1984) argues that the nature of the Tamil ur (village, or home) is inherently linked to the nature of its inhabitants, who are affected by, and in turn, affect it. The substance of ur soil, water and agricultural produce is shared by all villagers, who absorb them and develop their particular qualities. Ur is therefore central to self-definition. Such notions also apply in Talukpur. Implicit in attitudes expressed about food, particularly rice, is the notion that through eating one is linked to one's particular village and homestead. Village rice, grown on household land and not bought in the bazaar, is seen as more satisfying, more nutritious and altogether better. The same is true of fish caught in the river, water-logged fields, or ponds. By eating these foods one is filled with the nature of the village, or rather, the nature of the social group which inhabits it. When preparing to leave the village, people are expected to eat vast quantities of rice, and so take with them some of the essence of their associates. The food of the desh not only nourishes members of the group, but its consumption is also a sign of belonging and socialisation. Children, for example, are thought incapable of disobedience until they start to eat rice. Once they consume household produce, I was told, they become subject to household rules. The desh and its nutritious qualities are thus absorbed by its inhabitants and link them to it.

The sacred desh

At the level of the land lived upon, owned and farmed by the patrilineage, desh involves the social power of the kin group. In the wider definition of desh – the whole region of Sylhet – it is viewed by locals as containing a different and very special sort of power, rooted in its mythical history. Village versions of Sylheti history start with the arrival of the Muslim conqueror and holy man, Shah Jalal, in AD 1384. The myth claims that he was sent to Hindustan by his guru, with instructions to stay and spread the word of Allah wherever he found the same type of soil as a sample he had been given before departure. It was in Sylhet that the soil sample matched. Today the region is known as the land of the saints, and Sylhet is an important pilgrimage centre within Bangladesh. The 360 disciples who accompanied Shah Jalal are also buried locally.

Villagers believe that the sakti of these holy men has been absorbed by the soil in which they are buried, giving deshi earth a special, spiritual power. The soil and water around their shrines are seen as having healing properties, and are applied to the bodies of visiting pilgrims and the sick. Holy sites are also believed to bring prosperity and virtue to the people in their vicinity. If a saint's burial place is discovered within the boundaries of a homestead and is given due honour by making it into a shrine, then it is said that the homestead can expect good fortune.

The spiritual power of the desh is also seen to affect its fertility. Cultivators in Talukpur told me that their land was especially fertile because it contained the spiritual essence of the saints, and thus their power. As one young man put it: 'Sylhet District has more power than other districts in Bangladesh. The trees and
fields are more beautiful. This is because this is the country of the saints. The
great saints came here. The soil has more strength, and the fields yield more
paddy'.

Again, too, the desh and its potency is affected by those in it. The more
religious the people, the more fertile is the soil. Prayer, sacrifice and almsgiving
are all thought to increase prosperity and the bounty of the land. Desh, as the land
on which rural society depends, is the source of a basic life-giving power, which
sustains and nurtures its inhabitants. This in turn comes from the social group,
through its religiosity, order and continuity. It is not surprising that those away
from the desh believe that only food from home can really sustain and nourish
them. As we shall see, in Britain it is usual for Sylheti families to eat fish and rice
imported especially from Bangladesh. By eating deshi produce those abroad are
sustained, and remain part of it. Desh is, in a sense, imported into bidesh; it
becomes an extension of the desh.

But although the desh is viewed as a source of spiritual power, the locus of
socialisation and morality, there is another apparently contradictory image. This
ambivalence is not simply heterogeneity in village attitude, since all villagers
express a dualistic perception of desh. The different representations are not con-
tradictory, but refer to different meanings of the term. The desh of saints and
ancestors is very different from the nation state, where different types of power
are important.

Despite the pride with which the desh is sometimes referred to as the ‘Golden
Bengal’ of the homeland, villagers of every economic position also present it in
terms of want and suffering. The most frequent response to a wide range of
questions, whether by men or women, rich or poor, is: ‘Our country is poor’. People
tend to frame their experiences in terms of their suffering and troubles. This stems in part from the very real poverty throughout Bangladesh; but still,
even the most wealthy villagers are apt to repeat the same phrases as their landless
neighbours. The following statement is typical:

Our country is poor. Actually there is no profit to be had from staying here. The fields don’t
give a surplus, we eat all the rice we produce. If we go to London, we can get big wages by
working ... This isn’t just my opinion, but everyone’s. (Young man of wealthy family).

These attitudes are partly attributable to the history and conditions of Ban-
gladesh. In the days of the liberation war, Bengali identity and the importance of
the Bengali language were central themes in the struggle against West Pakistan;
the desh was imbued with nationalistic hope. Since then, however, the nation’s
history has become a grim catalogue of coups, famines, cyclones, riots and floods.
The memory of bloody fighting locally is still fresh in the minds of many people,
as is the time of great upheaval and lawlessness following the assassination of
Sheikh Mujib, the leader who for many was the symbol of a brave and free
Bangladesh, and whose leadership, by 1974, had turned decidedly sour. Although
the country is now experiencing relative stability, general strikes and civil disrup-
tion are common.

Political factors are just one component of the presentation of desh (in this
context understood as state rather than village) as insecure and blighted by scarcity.
Reliance on international aid must also have contributed (Sobhan 1982). The Bangladeshi state does little to refute the stereotype of the desh as a 'basket case'.3
Indeed, various leaders have used their ability to attract foreign aid as a strategy to gain popularity and legitimacy at home.

The physical conditions of Bangladesh are also important. Given widespread flooding in 1987 and 1988, when once again Bangladesh had to appeal for foreign aid, it is not surprising that villagers referred to their country in terms of suffering. Flooding, crop loss and changing river courses which sweep whole villages away are an integral part of life in much of Bangladesh. Every monsoon has its victims; even before the main floods of 1988, several homesteads close to Talukpur had crumbled into the river. Ideals of rootedness are therefore constantly contradicted by reality. Although village culture promotes the ideal of being tied to the land for many generations, physical change and unrootedness is in fact far more common. Farmers say they are never sure of their crop, and rural life generally is seen as uncertain and full of danger. This is particularly so for the poorest members of society for whom crop failure, the loss of their homestead, or illness, may prove disastrous.

Images of the desh are also affected by a growing land shortage. Laws of equal inheritance and a rapidly growing population mean insufficient land to go round (Jansen 1987). Land-owning has also polarised, so that the proportion of landless is larger than ever (about one third of the population). The scarcity of which villagers talk is thus very real. Over-cropping and over-use of fertilizers also cause diminishing yields. In all, the fertility of the soil in Talukpur, and its capacity to feed everyone, is seen as declining. Times were once bountiful, farmers say, but now they are sparse. The strength of the land is limited, and will soon run out.

Desh and bidesh: discourses of power

Views of the desh as insecure and in decline are based to a large extent upon objective conditions internal to Bangladesh. I suggest, however, that they are also affected by Bangladesh's relationship to bidesh, by migration, and by structures of dependency which link place with place and person to person. That the land is seen as ailing spiritually is an expression of the economic and political dominance of bidesh, and of radical changes within the desh. In rather crude terms, such images are the ideological concomitant of the dominance of the capitalist 'core' over its 'periphery'. The images also symbolise the threat of change and the social and moral disorder which it might bring. The view that declining social morality is having an adverse affect on the power of the land was expressed to me many times:

Before, the soil was very fertile, and there was much paddy, but now the amount each field yields has greatly decreased. Where we once got 3 maund (about 40 kg), now we get one. This is because people are no longer religious. They sin, and tell lies (Labourer).

Once, we could plant paddy in the morning, and by the evening it would be ready to harvest. Such was the land's fertility! Now, day by day it goes down. Our prophet told it to go away. ... Foreign land has strength, but not ours (Labourer).

In the second quotation, the finite and failing powers of the desh are clearly closely associated with a view of foreign lands as strong and a source of great prosperity. Whilst desh is still central to one type of power and sustenance, bidesh has become the source of a more materialistic power, upon which the desh now depends. There are, therefore, two discourses in Talukpur, each used at different
times. In the first, morality, or spirituality, affect the fertility, and hence economic potential of the land. In the second, spirituality and economic power are separate. *Bidesh* possesses the latter type of power.

Whilst perceptions of *bidesh* are tied to the visible material results of migration from the village, they are clearly also a way for villagers to express something inherent to their own *desh* and circumstances. *Bidesh* has, quite simply, become a way of talking about power, both between people and between places. Let me begin by examining the statements which people repeat about Britain, which is by far the most discussed place in Talukpur, and is usually where people mean when they speak of *bidesh*.

**The nature of bidesh**

One of the most striking features of *Londoni* villages is the local fixation with *bidesh*. Everywhere I went, I was asked, sometimes almost immediately, to take a child or adult to Britain. At times there was an element of banter involved in this request, but it was often completely serious. The universality of these appeals suggests the prevalence of something integral to life in Talukpur, the new symbol and aspiration of *bidesh*. People make strikingly uniform remarks about this; nearly everyone in Talukpur who has not migrated, whatever their economic status or sex, voices similar views to the following:

London is a good, beautiful place. There, all types of food are available. In Bangladesh nothing is available. In London, everyone is happy.

In London everybody’s rich, and there’s no fighting. Everywhere is clean too, there’s no mud or dirt like here.

‘London’ is constantly discussed and eulogised. There, it is believed, no problems exist. Over and over again I heard how the UK is clean, peaceful and wealthy; a place without fighting or poverty. It is a source of plenty and of security. Although the wealth of Britain is admired, it is not, however, British society to which people aspire. Western culture is not seen as desirable, but as amoral and heathen. Many people believe the West to be plagued by sexual immorality, alcoholism, divorce and a lack of familial duty and authority. Villagers who idealise Britain, and wish to go there, are not hoping to join British society, but that of British-based Bengalis. After all, since *desh* is inherently social, it can be recreated anywhere, albeit in a modified form, so long as members of the social group are present. Britain is therefore the source of material power for Sylhetis within it, but British culture is not. This does not mean that British Bengalis themselves aim at what has been termed ‘encapsulation’, or lack interest in ‘assimilation’. The views above are those of villagers who have never been outside Sylhet, and who are balancing a belief in a non-Islamic and non-Bengali society as tremendously powerful, with their faith and pride in Islam, and in Bengali culture.

**Return migrants and bidesh**

Most villagers learn about foreign countries from return migrants, whose stories are later reproduced in increasingly fantastic form by non-migrants. For those who never left, horizons still tend to be limited (especially for women) and images of foreign lands are hazy. There are occasional pictures of relatives in
British parks or inside their British homes, and sometimes snaps of village men in Saudi Arabia, dressed in Arab robes, but little else. It is therefore for the returned *bideshis* to provide the messages which build up local images of foreign countries.

Migration to the West from places such as Bangladesh is often portrayed by Western observers more in terms of exploitation and powerlessness, than opportunities for economic advancement (Meillassoux 1981; Castle *et al.* 1984; Cohen 1987). This is partly a reflection of empirical reality. Many migrants and their families do indeed face unpleasant conditions and difficult lives in Europe; racism, poverty and homelessness are very real problems. In Britain, some Bengalis are very poor and have neither permanent housing nor the means to return to Bangladesh. Conditions for South Asian workers in the Middle East, too, are known to be harsh (Owens 1985).

As I suggested earlier, however, British stereotypes do not do justice to the economic success of many migrants. Moreover, popular British images of the ‘Bangladeshi community’ in the UK are very different from those held by non-migrants in Sylhet. Indeed, in Sylhet return migrants tend to concur with the positive views of *bidesh*. Their status, after all, is derived from their positive connexion with a place of power, access to which is central to their identity. They do not consciously manipulate the perceptions of those who never left, but they do give out certain signs, and avoid others, to create a particular image of themselves. And the perceptions, indeed the wishes, of the non-migrants are projected onto these.

At this very simple level, then, the glorification of *bidesh* is a result of the example of migrants who have returned home. Whilst British poverty can be hidden from the village, economic advancement is immediately evident in the land and new houses of the successful families. The *bideshis* are the new elite, and everybody wants to join them. There is, of course, only one way to do this – by migrating. *Bidesh* is thus seen in Talukpur as the only means for self-advancement. Correspondingly, poverty is explained in terms of whether or not a household has kin in Britain or the Middle East: *bidesh* has become a symbol which separates the prosperous from the poor.

This village may be getting richer, but we shan’t. People with *bideshi* relatives may be able to improve their positions, but we can’t (wife of sharecropper).

These attitudes actively affect people’s behaviour. In the desperation to migrate, loans are taken which can only be repaid at great effort, land is sold and gaol risked. This ‘gamble’ of selling all the household’s fields, and attempting to buy a contract for work overseas, is perfectly rational in terms of local perceptions of *bidesh* and the benefits it will surely bring, if only one can get there. Likewise, people spend many years, and thousands of *taka*, on protracted cases with the British immigration authorities. Often this is in an effort to reunite separated families, but sometimes, too, it is motivated by the belief that entry to Britain is the only route to economic success.

The dream of migration has become a form of escapism for those who have never been outside Bangladesh. Since for many people independent enterprise and self-advancement is almost impossible, to believe in another place as the way out of a seemingly endless cycle of work, indebtedness and powerlessness has obvious appeal. Belief in the power of *bidesh* is not only demonstrated by the
‘migration mania’ rampant in London areas, however, but also by attitudes shown to foreign goods.

People and things

Consumption and migration. Migration is essentially a series of exchanges between places (Mandel 1990). Whilst people and remittances move between places, so too do goods, often in the form of gifts. This is central to our opening song: the singer’s feelings about Britain and Sylhet are expressed partly through a description of the exchange of goods between each place. Werbner (1990) has shown how gift exchange helps reproduce Pakistani identity in Britain, while also linking Pakistan with the UK. Amongst Sylhetis too, gift exchange, and the consumption of certain goods, is central to the reproduction of the culture of migration. The understanding of consumption as filled with social and political meaning has been the focus of substantial discussion in recent years (Appadurai 1986; Bloch & Parry 1989). Somewhat less discussed is its role in the reproduction of ideas about places. In Talukpur, consumption is an important part of the establishment of group status and power. Moreover, the goods and the beliefs which people hold about them produce and reproduce images of desh and bidesh. Gift exchange and consumption within Sylhet, then, are part of the discourse of power between places.

Gifts from the desh. We have already seen how food produced in the desh is closely linked to notions of belonging and identity. It is not surprising that this is sent from the desh to relatives overseas. The bags of migrants returning to Britain are often filled with chutney, pickled mangoes and dried fish. Once in Britain these are distributed to the kin of village neighbours living nearby. Likewise, Bangladeshi food is readily available in many British cities. In London, fresh Sylheti fish is flown in daily. In season jackfruit (selling for twenty or thirty pounds each) can be bought in Brick Lane and Spitalfields market. Most families consume rice from Bangladesh or India, along with betel nut, spices and a wide variety of Bengali vegetables.

Another category of goods sent from the desh to families settled overseas is that used for healing. Once more, these goods are associated with bodily well-being. They also emphasise the spiritual nature of the desh, for most are prepared by a mullah and are of a religious nature. Amulets containing Quranic text, for example, are often sent from Sylhet to sick relatives in Britain. So too are potions and herbs prepared by kobiraj (herbal healers) in the desh. Whilst not as sacred as water or dates brought back by pilgrims from Mecca, these goods emphasise that Britain does not provide spiritual replenishment and that social reproduction is still largely provided by the desh.

Central to this exchange is, of course, the passage of women from desh to bidesh. This ‘gift’ of brides is perhaps the most important way of maintaining links between places and of reproducing the desh overseas. A large number of such marriages are between cousins, usually within the patrilineage. The essence of the patrilineal group is thus extended to Britain, and non-migrant kin acquire links to bidesh through their daughters.
Although British-born women do sometimes marry local men, in Talukpur most marriages between _desh_ and _bidesh_ involve the marriage of village women to British men.\(^4\) Whilst the bride’s family gain the prestige of a _Londoni_ daughter (although no assurances of economic support), their affines thus extend their links with the _desh_.

To some extent the pattern of these gifts is changing. Increasingly, British businesses, whether Bengali or not, are providing the goods once sent from the _desh_ (such as canned _pan_ from India, or spices from other parts of Asia), and Islamic specialists in Britain can provide amulets and religious healing when necessary. In many respects the establishment of mosques and madrasas in the UK is making British space sacred – Britain is becoming the _desh_. In turn, as children born in Britain are increasingly reluctant to take partners from rural Bangladesh, marriage patterns are changing (Gardner 1990) and spouses are being found from within the British Bengali community. But in the eyes of those who send them, it is clear that gifts which flow from _desh_ to _bidesh_ are concerned with the spiritual reproduction and essence of the patrimony. This is in stark contrast to the goods which flow in the opposite direction.

_Gifts from _bidesh_. In Talukpur, the consumption of foreign goods, either received from relatives abroad, or obtained through remittances, clearly marks status and economic difference; in this sense it helps reproduce social positions and relations (Douglas & Isherwood 1980; Appadurai 1986). In turn, the various goods also disseminate messages about _bidesh_, thus adding further to the status of those who receive and exchange them.

Clothing is a principal item of exchange. Returning migrants always bring large suitcases filled with clothes – witness our singer’s hopes for a new _London made_ blouse. _Bideshi_ saris are the most highly prized, for the cloth is bought abroad and the saris made in India or Southeast Asia. Although the Bangladeshi textile industry produces beautiful cloth, the social value of the _bideshi_ materials is higher. They are less readily available and, more importantly, signify contact with _bidesh_. Discussing the symbolic importance of cloth in Indian resistance to British rule, Bayley (1986) shows its development as a central nationalist symbol, signifying purity and the virtue of home over foreign, during the Swadeshi movement. In contrast, in Talukpur clothing is not used to assert love of the _desh_, but instead, desire to belong to the category of _bideshi_.

Other goods, and their ownership by migrants, carry similar messages, indicating a preference for things from outside Bangladesh, which are always believed to be of higher quality. This includes toiletries as well as expensive commodities. Pots of face cream, shampoo and perfume from Britain and the Middle East are treasured by younger women and displayed in glass-fronted cabinets. Young men prize Western cigarettes, expensive looking watches and jewellery. Also highly valued are electronic goods, such as cassette recorders, televisions and fridges, even though Talukpur has no electricity.

More influential than consumer goods, however, are remittances. Whilst most migrant households invest primarily in land, once they have enough money they almost invariably build themselves _pakka_ (stone) houses. During the wet season, when building materials can be transported by boat, the village is a hive of building activity. Once completed, the buildings are their owners’ pride and joy.
They are painted in bright colours, sometimes with designs of flowers along the outside trellises and the name of the owner and date of building embellished on the front. They have large, spacious rooms with wooden doors and sometimes cement floors. Many have indoor latrines and bathrooms. All have pretty verandas so that women can sit and work in the fresh air. One house in Talukpur has two stories, which in other Londoni villages is commonplace.

Pakka houses do more than provide comfort for their inhabitants. With the imposing walls which often surround them, prettily painted outdoor privies and large ponds, they indicate status. They also display many symbols of life abroad. Nearly all the new features of the houses are Western – the indoor bathrooms, the windows (occasionally glazed, doing little to keep the rooms cool), the two stories, and so on. Western furniture styles are also fashionable – three-piece suites, coffee tables, and glass-fronted cabinets to display crockery. Some houses have the clearest sign of all of migration: large aeroplanes are painted on their walls or, in one house, are represented in stone and perched on the roof like gargoyles.

Conspicuous consumption is of course commonplace as a mark of status and power. What is interesting in Talukpur is how such consumption carries messages about bridesh and its relationship to the desh. If the principal differentiation in the village is between migrants and non-migrants, through their display of brideshi goods and housing styles, migrant families clearly indicate their success. But as we have also seen, on another level glorification of bridesh reflects the economic dependency of the desh on aid and remittances from overseas, and the hegemonic power of international capitalism. People’s representations of bridesh as all-powerful and the desh as failing, its goods undesirable and its opportunities rare, can thus be seen not only as reflections of empirical circumstances, but also as the ideological content of economic and political domination and dependency. By owning and exchanging brideshi goods, one is symbolically laying claim to some of its power, whilst in turn reproducing dependency on bridesh as the source of all opportunity.

**Conclusion**

Local images of desh and bridesh thus essentially refer to distributions of power between and within places. Whilst the ‘Golden Bengal’ of poetry and village lore is a source of great, life-giving power based upon its spirituality and intimate relationship with the social group, bridesh is the source of material power, which can economically transform those in contact with it. The ultimate political power is foreign too. Foreign powers colonised Bengal, created East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, and utilised local labour at will. Images of the desh are therefore tied both to objective conditions within Bangladesh, and to bridesh and its power. Both desh and bridesh are interdependent and a changing perspective of one affects that of the other.

There is therefore a tension existing at the very core of local culture and lives. Desh is the locus of society, the roots of a person, and yet it is also a place where no prosperity or advancement is perceived to be possible. This representation is tied to the changes precipitated by the growing importance of migration in the village. It is also related to more general conditions in Bangladesh, of insecurity and political instability, and a world, which due to over-population, fragmented
land holdings and environmental hazards, is increasingly impoverished. Thus, while villagers in Britain or the Middle East may not wish to lose contact with their *desh*, and while it is the *desh* that provides true nutrition, that heals, that people invest in emotionally, and that so many migrants eventually wish to return to, it is *bidesh* to which they now aspire. The balancing of these seemingly contradictory sets of ideals and perceptions is a major concern in Talukpur. It is also the cultural and emotional content of what has been termed the 'myth of return' amongst South Asians who have settled in Britain, but see their lives there as temporary and dream of going home (Dahya 1973; Anwar 1979).

Interdependence between places does not imply that their relationship is static, but often the reverse. The changing relation of migrants to the homeland embodies this fluidity (Mandel 1990). Indeed, if *desh* can be recreated abroad (Jeffery 1976), then dependence upon the village by British Sylhetis will eventually decrease. As a growing proportion of the social group is located in Britain, it will become increasingly orientated to British-Bengali society, and the village will no longer be 'home' (Eade 1990). Back in Talukpur, however, the balancing process in which migration is acknowledged to be of prime importance, and yet cultural order must be maintained, informs people's beliefs and behaviour in almost every context. With continued dependence upon remittances, and opportunities for migration to the Middle East, *bidesh* will not decrease in importance. Even if those settled in the UK gradually cease to view Bangladesh as a source of spiritual power and as their *desh*, the aspiration to migrate in Talukpur, and the view of *bidesh* as the source of material empowerment, will not diminish, for the village is now dependent upon it, both as an economic reality and as an image. Thus, the reordering of attitudes, perspectives and behaviour inspired by the tension of *desh-bidesh* will remain one of the most important facts of Talukpuri life.

NOTES

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1 See, for example, Home Affairs Committee Report to the House of Commons (1986-87), 'Bengalis in Britain'.

2 This category consists of households with no members abroad during my fieldwork or in the previous five years. The category was not static; some households had elderly members who had worked on the ships, but had been unable to establish a 'chain' with younger kin, and their advantages had withered away.

3 A comment made at a 1971 meeting of the United States National Security Council, and now often used with reference to Bangladesh.

4 British immigration authorities are reluctant to give the Sylheti husbands of British Bengali women rights of residence in the UK. Whilst British bureaucracy usually shows little interest in the cultural norms of 'ethnic minorities', in this instance the norm of patri locality is cited to argue that since married couples usually live in the husband's household, the application for British residence is bogus.

REFERENCES


Etre chez-soi ou être au loin : évocations sylheti

Résumé
Dans les villages d’émigrants du Sylhet, les lieux, et les images qu’ils évoquent, représentent des formes de pouvoir distinctes, et même parfois rivales. Alors que la terre natale est associée à tout ce qui est spirituel et religieux, l’étranger représente la richesse matérielle et la possibilité de transformation économique, si bien que les voyages à l’étranger, considérés comme la seule avenue débouchant sur la prospérité, excèdent le désir de la population locale. On peut donc voir dans les mondes extérieurs ‘imaginés’ par ceux qui n’ont jamais émigré des équivalents à une situation objective de dépendance vis-à-vis de l’extérieur. Par ailleurs, le fait que les habitants de la région entretiennent un rapport ambiguement avec leurs origines illustre clairement les contradictions liées à l’émigration.

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