ISAS Insights

No. 404 – 28 April 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
http://southasiandiaspora.org

‘Glocal’ Citizenship and the Bangladeshis in Diaspora: Preliminary Considerations

Citizenship in the era of globalisation has moved beyond the four walls of the nation state. People on the move who have left their homeland in search of employment aspire to new identities and rights in their host countries which they strive to conflate with the rights and identities they were born into. This paper examines this new form of ‘glocal’ citizenship that seeks to combine the global and the local, with reference to the Bangladeshi diaspora.

Habibul Haque Khondker[1]

Introduction

Despite the new refrain of “end of globalisation”, the processes of globalisation and the attendant glocalisation have intensified. One of the empirical areas where this is evident is in the emergence of what I would call glocal citizenship. The phenomenon of enhanced global communication and physical movement back and forth has created what is called ‘transnational’ citizenship, as compared to citizenship that was tied to the nation state. The complexities of the intermingling of global and local, in turn, led to the phenomenon of

[1] Dr Habibul Haque Khondker is Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. He can be contacted at habibul.khondker@zu.ac.ae. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

'glocalisation'. This paper seeks to look into the two levels of glocalisation: firstly, at the local level, where local becomes global with the penetration of and negotiations with the global, and, secondly, at the global level, when global spaces are penetrated by local communities with their norms and practices. Thus glocalisation has evolved in the transnational space among diasporic peoples who represent the dis-embeddedness and re-embeddedness at the same time in their own biographical experience of trans-border mobility.

Glocalisation as a Bridge between the Global and the Local

The 2014 World Cup Soccer posed a particular problem for Sherina, a 14-year old school-going Dutch citizen, who was growing up in the suburb of Amsterdam. One day, she was supporting the Dutch team, another day the Colombian team. Thanks to the lack of soccer skills of the Bangladeshi team that failed in the preliminary qualifiers, she was spared of further complications of competing loyalties. Sherina's father is a Dutch citizen of Bangladeshi origin while her mother is from Colombia. As the World Cup proceeded, there was a theoretical possibility that the Dutch and the Colombians might face off, a possibility that was averted when Colombia lost to the Brazilian team and Sherina was spared of a huge dilemma. As the Dutch team took on the Brazilians for the third position, Sherina finally showed her unalloyed support for her national, namely, the Dutch team.

Sherina is not alone in facing such dilemmas of multiple and contested loyalties in a highly globalised world, or as one might say, a glocalised world. Why glocal? Many Bangladeshis in the diaspora, or for that matter, Pakistanis, Nepalese or Indians are faced with similar dilemmas of having to live with multiple and, sometimes, conflicting localities. They inhabit one locality physically and another psychologically or nostalgically. Here, I present the Bangladeshi case, partly because my own experience provides me a ringside perspective.

While glocalisation lies at the root of nationalism, a new form of glocalisation evolves in the so-called transnational space among the diasporic peoples. They represent dis-embeddedness and re-embeddness at the same time in their own biographical experience of trans-border mobility. The diasporic groups can be re-thought as trans-local rather than transnational, or to be more inclusive, they could be reconfigured as both transnational and trans-local at the same time. Upon closer reflections, both transnational and trans-local can be captured in

terms of the process of glocalisation as a transnational phenomenon rather than a local phenomenon only. In other words, I am suggesting here two sides of glocalisation: one at the local level where local becomes glocal with the penetration of and negotiations with the global, and at the global level when global spaces are penetrated by local communities with their norms and practices.

Metropolitan to Glocal: Bangladeshis in Diaspora

One would find immediately in several diasporic Bangladeshi communities, be in Singapore, Australia, Canada, the United States (US) or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the presence of multiple Bangladeshi civic associations. Some associations represent professional organisations, some political platforms, others personalities of national heroes, but most such associations represent localities, the local hometowns (districts even sub-districts). They cover the whole range – from metropolitan to local associations. The earlier generation of Bengalis who took the leap to travel to and settle in some distant land was more likely to be integrated with the host communities. For example, in Singapore, many early settlers of Bengali origin from what is now Bangladesh had a close relationship with the Malay community in Singapore sometimes through intermarriage. Similarly, a small number of Bangladeshis who reached Europe in the post-independence period were better integrated into the host society and some of them even established a matrimonial link. The presence of a small number of fellow Bangladeshis forced them to forge a closer relationship with the host society.

With an increase in the size of membership of the Bangladeshi community, newly migrant Bangladeshis immediately found a readymade transplanted Bangladeshi society and cultural trappings outfitted with Bengali restaurant, grocery and a mosque, not to mention the presence of several civic organisations. A Bangladeshi migrant to Los Angeles in the early 1980s narrated his expedition to the city. Even before reaching Los Angeles by Greyhound bus, he assumed that there would be a mosque to indicate the location of a small Bangladeshi community in the city. And, if there was a mosque, the Imam of the mosque was likely to be from Noakhali, a district known for exporting both a large number of Bangladeshi migrants and Imams. The Bangladeshi sojourner's assumption was proven accurate. And the Imam, after finding out that the homeless visitor was from Noakhali, who was considering spending

the night at the mosque, hosted him at his own place since the migrant was a "fellow countryman". The common root of a district was basis enough to forge a common identity with the new immigrant.

Bangladeshis or Bengalis have a long history of movements across the seas. The restaurants in London and elsewhere reveal a long history of migration of the Bangladeshis. Here, I want to focus on the Bangladeshi migrants since the creation of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971. The flow of post-independence overseas migration involved many young people, most of them students as well as professionals – mainly doctors, pharmacists, and engineers – had left a war-torn Bangladesh for better prospects in the greener pastures. The middle-class background of the Bangladeshi migrants and their knowledge of English prepared them for upward social mobility overseas. In Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, immigration of professionals was encouraged due to the preferential treatment of the highly-skilled professionals in granting immigration visa. Bangladeshi professionals were beneficiaries of these immigration policies. Upwardly mobile Bangladeshis moved as far as North America and other destinations in Europe. Middle-class professionals migrated to improve their life-chances and status and Bangladeshis were no exception.

Class, Mobility and Identity

It may be useful to explore the impact of migration or geographical mobility on the class mobility of the Bangladeshi diaspora, and the impact of mobility on the question of identity in the age of globalisation. The link between geographical mobility and status mobility or vertical mobility in class terms is a sociological truism.

More recent movements in the US was encouraged by the introduction of the Diversity Visa (DV) in 1986 so that the immigration is not skewed to the highly-qualified professionals alone. A good number of Bangladeshis without any academic credentials or technical qualifications could relocate to the US under the DV arrangement. An increase in the number of Bangladeshis led to a proliferation of Bangladeshi civic organisations. In a conversation with a Bangladeshi who worked at a convenience store in Manhattan in New York in 2009, I learnt that, in the small community where he lived, he was the only one with a college degree. Before winning the lottery of DV visa, he worked as a journalist in a small town in Bangladesh. He added that, of the Bangladeshis who live in a housing project, his wife is the

only one who does not fully cover her body. The new immigrants in the US from Bangladesh are more religious. The heightened religiosity impacts their identity in a foreign land where the increasing numbers of civic organisations and community activities present new forms of glocalisation.

In addition to the rise in the number of mosques, the proliferation of grocery shops selling *halal*[2] food signified not only a numerical growth of Bangladeshis but also the level of religiosity of the new Bangladeshi and other Muslim migrants. Religious associations and public affirmation of religion may take a back foot with the hardline response to religious radicalism under the changed political climate in the US in 2017. The Bangladeshi online discussion group evolved from *soc.culture.bangladesh* group, an online platform for discussions on Bangladesh where émigré Bangladeshis played a dominant part to a proliferation of websites with religious contents. The availability of satellite television not only revived merchandising sacred stones and talisman drenched in the blessings of the holy men operating from Bangladesh, but also promised success in lottery and court cases even if they involved immigration-related lawsuits. These holy men claimed to have connections with gods of various religions and delegated to perform such miracles. A number of television channels of Bangladesh that beam their programmes in North America via satellites are sites of endless advertisements of the holy men – some of them returnee migrants with experiences of living in the holy cities in Saudi Arabia. Such credentials are handy for selling their talisman and blessings. The other culturally-significant items promoted by satellite televisions are cooking shows hosted by celebrity cook-book writers or cooks. The glocal Bangladeshis relish these shows promoting recipes as well as food products from "back home". Local recipes from various regions and districts are now offered in various cooking shows on television beamed into the expatriates' homes that add to a glocal culinary flavor to their households.

It is also evident that international migration is not class neutral. The upper class or the elites of a society are least likely to migrate since they fear a loss of status in a foreign land. Their elite status and position in society as upper strata are dependent on the local context. Thus they are less likely to leave their location. However, there are exceptions – to secure the future well-being of their families and children, they prefer to find a second home. The upwardly mobile sections of Bangladeshis, especially the newly rich deriving their wealth

[2] Denotes or relates to meat prepared as prescribed by Muslim law.

from world-system linked businesses, prefer to secure a safe base outside Bangladesh since the perceived political instability in the country is often on their minds. Despite the recent economic development and (engineered) political stability, the long-term ecological prognosis of Bangladesh is not viable. However, the captains of the new industrial class are not prompted by the long-term prospects but the short-term where they want a second home where they would have access to decent educational and healthcare facilities for their family members.

This conscious plan has led to creating truly transnational or mobile families. A good number of Bangladeshi families from the industrial class – mainly garment industries – have relocated their families to Canada with Toronto as their most favored destinations. Those who are not able to reach that far have chosen Malaysia by taking advantage of the latter's second home policy. In Toronto, members of the new rich Bangladeshi families are known as "Garments Begums" apparently because of the source of their wealth in garment industries of Bangladesh that has created between 3,000 and 4,000 millionaires in terms of US dollars. Many of these families have congregated in Danforth Village, Victoria Park area in Toronto. In recent years, they have been joined by the second-hand circulatory migrants from the UAE from where, because of the push factors, upper-middle-class Bangladeshi families have sent their wives and children to Canada while they remain in the UAE to earn and remit a good part of their substantial income.

Circular Migration among the Bangladeshis

Bangladeshis have become increasingly footloose. In some cases, their first port of call allows only temporary migration as in the case of the Gulf States of the Middle East, which the professional class uses as a stepping-stone or a springboard for further movement with better and long-term opportunities. Some Bangladeshi families, who called Singapore home, moved to Australia and Canada for improved quality of life. Singapore thus provided, unwittingly, a step, a port of transition for further migration. For some, it was the allure of a larger house with a spacious backyard, while for others, it was a combination of political space, more freedom and opportunities for social mobility. At the same time, one would observe the migration of professionals, Bengalis included, to Singapore from North America and Europe, who found better opportunities and considered geographical proximity to

ancestral or cultural homes in India and Bangladesh as a motivating factor for their continued migration. A "Bangladeshi" migrant family in Abu Dhabi with permanent residential status in Australia with Canadian citizenship end up spending a good deal of time and money traveling back and forth across continents.

Temporary Migration in the UAE and the Gulf States

One of the stereotypical views of the Bangladeshi migrants – sojourners, to be more accurate – in the Middle East and especially in the oil-rich Gulf States is that everyone is a construction worker toiling to support his financially-strapped families back home. The majority of the Bangladeshis are workers in the broader sense of the term but the image hides the varied nature of work that the Bangladeshis undertake in the Gulf region – from flying the national airlines of the regions and agricultural workers to Imams in local mosques. The high-earning professionals sometimes use their wealth and nostalgia to create and sponsor localities such as the Khulna Association or Satkania Association, alongside such professional associations as the Diploma Engineer's Association or Engineers Association. The Gulf region too offers opportunities for upward social mobility. Some of the richest businessmen of the Bangladeshi community (as in Indian community) moved from rags to riches in their own lifetime, expanding their businesses beyond the region. However, what is more striking is the inter-generational mobility. Some of the middle-class families have been successful in sponsoring their children's education overseas, paving the way for promising careers in the international job market.

The other stereotype is that of temporariness. Many of the Bangladeshi migrants on work or business visa have spent their entire lifetime in the UAE. In a recent study, I interviewed businessmen who spent more than three decades in the country. As a result of the highly restrictive citizenship laws, expatriates from South Asia and elsewhere who are involved in important projects or are in business, are allowed to stay for decades.

Following common sense, hearsays and (as if) the advice of Lord Keynes, "migration is the first act against poverty", tens of thousands of Bangladeshis have worked in the Gulf States in past decades. Despite the heartbreaking stories of exploitation and miseries that some workers experience, on the whole, Bangladeshi workers who work in this region are better off

after their tour of work than before. Not all working class migrants escaped poverty and attained middle-class status, but their financial situations, as well as social status back home, improved. This explains why, despite the odds, tens of thousands of the workers from Bangladesh risk travelling to the Gulf even when serious push factors are absent.[3] It would be useful to remember that Bangladesh has been posting six per cent economic growth rate for more than the past decade and the level of poverty has significantly declined in recent years.[4]

Glocalisation of Citizenship and the Status Inconsistencies of the Non-resident Bangladeshis

A school kid was asked in India many years ago what he wants to be when he grows up. His answer was to become a non-resident Indian. Although many in Bangladesh are planning to be non-residents, it is not getting strong traction as nationalism is still strong – people living overseas are often derided as people who live in *bidesh* (foreign land) and thus are ignorant of their homeland. Their opinions are not taken seriously – they are often taken to be removed from the politics and happenings of the everyday world. Contrary to the image, some in *bidesh* live in a recreated *desh* (homeland) – showcasing the culture of the homeland and celebrating the national day. This imaginary world and the delusion it creates can sometimes be ironic as some Bangladeshis who return to their homeland find a different environment altogether.

Migration and its impact on its identity are also gendered. Many Bangladeshi women in the diaspora are reluctant to return to Bangladesh as they fear their new-found freedom of running their own household and economic independence may be compromised if they return to their homeland. Such perceptions also seem to be biased and inconsistent with the changes in the women's status in Bangladesh where a large number of middle-class urban women enjoy economic independence.

The idea of glocal citizenship is going to generate a great deal of conflicting and inconsistent notions about loyalty, commitment and expanding spaces of negotiations and accommodations. The first reconciliation that is in order is between juridical citizenship and

[3] Khondker, H (2010) "Wanted but not Welcome: Social Determinants of Labor Migration in the UAE", Encounters. 2. Spring pp. 205-33.

[4] World Bank (2016) http://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh (World Bank, 2016).

cultural citizenship. A new cosmopolitan citizenship in the global space is now available, thanks to the social media and related technologies of social interactions. Yet, citizenship in the juridical sense will remain rooted in the national space, with allowance for a glocal citizenship at best.

. . . . . .