



A Bangladeshi crew in Oman



Cooking on the boat



The "big" boats with all-Bangladeshi crew, 8 to 10 people including the captain



The "small" boats for coastal fishing, officially reserved for Omani fishermen



The makeshift tents in which "small boats" Bangladeshi fishermen have to live on the beaches in a very hot climate

HATIYA FISHERMEN WORKING IN OMAN

From Environmental Disaster to Migratory Disaster

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"We try to stop them, but they want to go. They say that Allah may help them to find a good malik. And so, they go; and we let them go because we need food, because here we don't have enough. Here they have no work, and we have no land. And so, we, mothers, also start to hope that Allah will help them and one day they will be able to buy some land to work on."

These are the words of Fatema Begum, who lives in Hatiya Island (Noakhali), and whose son has just left to go fishing in Oman.

The first striking view of Hatiya is the high number of working children compared to other places in Bangladesh – a clear sign of poverty. According to the most recent BBS census, Hatiya is ranked among the 10 percent of the worst upazilas concerning education of children (e.g. number of schools and teachers, school attendance rate). The literacy rate here just reaches 34.2 percent.

Hatiya is prone to several environmental disasters among which land erosion is a major problem. Land erosion is particularly strong at its northern part, and the problem has largely increased in the last 20 years, leading to the displacement of many inhabitants. Erosion is partly compensated by the emergence of land in the south where the erosion victims gather on khas land, mostly on the embankments, which is an unsafe location in case of cyclones or water surge.

There is no industry in Hatiya; the only economic activities available are farming, fishing and very small local businesses. The situation is better during fishing season, which lasts for six months a year. Once over, competition for getting employment in the fields as day labourers – the only work available in the area – becomes intense. There is thus a high rate of unemployment, particularly among landless people.

To sum up, these people are really poor, many having lost the land they used to have, with no regular income and with no hope of a betterment in the future. Since no connection really exists with the Bangladeshi big cities or with other countries in the Gulf, the only option is to try their luck in Oman, where a local network has developed. It is a risk that many fishermen take. The men leaving for Oman are generally between 18 and 35 years old. Most of them are married, already have children and 70 percent of them are victims of erosion.

The connection between Hatiya and Oman is not old. It is possible to trace its precise origin. I met with the family of the first islander who left to fish in Oman. His sons explained the story. In the 80s, the family was poor. The father once went to visit a relative in the neighbouring island of Sandwip. People of Sandwip had already, at that time, started to migrate to Oman. With the help of this relative, he got a visa and left in 1989 to work as a fisherman. His boss in Oman, according to the sons, "was a good man" and he was soon made a captain. He was thus in a position to hire fishermen on behalf of his Omani boss.

At first, he helped two of his sons to come to Oman, and then his neighbours. The sons,

too, became captains and recruited other fishermen. A snowball effect set in, with more fishermen coming from Hatiya, more became captains, putting them in a position to recruit new islanders, namely to sell them visas. It is difficult to assess how many they are, but considering the number of fishing boats in Oman and the high proportion of Hatiya people among the crews, an estimate of at least 20,000 people seems reasonable. Almost all of them come from Jahajmara, a southern village where the biggest fishing boats of Hatiya are anchored and where thousands of erosion victims have gathered.

The visas are sold for more than two lakh takas in Hatiya, out of which more than half go to the Omani boat owner who sponsors the migrant. However, it is illegal for a boss in the Gulf to make a worker pay for his job. The migrating candidate then pays for the visa processing fees and the flight through a travel agent. Altogether, a job in Oman will cost no less than three lakh takas. Yet, in Hatiya, there are more candidates than visas to be sold.

I have, however, found no migrant, ex-migrant or candidate who already had the capital to invest in the departure. All of them had to borrow the largest part of the money. The interest rate ranges from 30 to 50 percent per year. And the full amount has to be paid before the migrant departs (hence long before he may send any remittances).

The migrants have no real idea about the contract they signed. None of my interlocutors could show me a paper describing his job abroad and its conditions. Real or not, the migration contract has been approved by the authorities since all of the men I met had the Emigration Clearance Certificate legally required to leave for unskilled or low-skilled migrant. And, although there are some conflicts about bad or false visas in Hatiya, the vast majority of migrants indeed got a job as a fisherman once they had arrived in Oman. Their disappointment or distress comes from the conditions they actually meet with in Oman, something far worse than their imagination.

In the 90s, the Omani government took steps to develop its fishing industry. It started to subsidise the purchase of boats by small investors. Those "big" boats need a crew of 8 to 10 men and can go on the high seas. At the same time, in a move to settle down its nomadic population by providing them with a job, it largely subsidised the purchase of smaller boats for coastal fishing on which two to three people could work.

In the first case, a foreign crew can legally be hired, while in the second, only Omanis are authorised to work as part of the "Omanisation" policy to reserve jobs for its citizens. Actually, nomads who used to rear goats did not turn into fishermen and, from the beginning, it was foreign labour which was – and still is – recruited for the small boats. It is a general feature in Oman, where the failure of the indigenisation of labour has eventually induced "irregular" migrants.

In the harbours that I visited in Oman, almost all the fishermen were Bangladeshi, most of them from Hatiya. The first words I learned from the migrants were indeed a story about humiliation.

"We are not even dogs for them. To bear the life here, you need to forget that you have a brain and a heart. Since I have come here, my heart is like

a stone. I thought I was a human being, but here we are no more than slaves."

Although the job is tough and the boats lack any proper amenities to live in, they did not complain so much about the conditions. The real problems arise once they are back in the harbour: problems of proper payment and potential abuse or violence.

The bad treatment from their Omani boss is a recurrent grief. Everywhere, I was given a depiction of the physical and verbal abuse the workers were suffering from.

A migrant whose back showed scars of having been beaten by a hammer, and another one whose leg was badly infected after a work accident and to whom his boss had denied any treatment; the young one who had been kicked in the stomach for not understanding a few Arabic words when he had been in Oman for less than a month, and more.

The second unanimous complaint revolves around the bad earnings they get. Fishermen are paid a share of the catch. The boat owner is supposed to get 50 percent and the rest is equally divided among the crew members. The problem is that the fishermen are denied any access to the fish market. They are dependent on their sponsor who, eventually, only gives them the amount he is willing to give.

The annual amount my interlocutors acknowledged having earned during their stay in Oman ranges from 1.1 lakh to 1.6 lakh takas. After their own expenses for food, housing for the time passed on shore, mobile phone, and others, it is a maximum of one lakh taka they can send home.

However, often the average among my interlocutors was 63,500 takas per year (this has to be compared with the three lakhs they had invested in order to go). They are clearly aware of the severe exploitation they are subjected to. Yet, they don't see how they could challenge their boss legally. The reality is that it is almost impossible for migrants to file a case in Oman as in any GCC country. They, consequently, feel stuck in a situation that many of them compare to slavery.

The work permit, in Oman, is valid for two years. It can then be renewed if the sponsor is willing to retain the worker. The renewal costs 44,500 takas in administrative fees and it is a common (although illegal) practice nowadays for the sponsors to ask the workers to pay this amount.

To stay as a documented worker is another big investment compared to the average remittances sent at home (1.27 lakh for two years). Those who had not been paid too badly during the first two years may prefer to ensure a more secure stay in Oman. The majority who could not invest more, or who had too low, too irregular or no wages at all for a period of time and those who, in addition, had a particularly disrespectful or violent boss, rather choose to take the risk of becoming undocumented migrants. It is generally by going to work on the small boats, something which is theoretically not allowed. They will consequently face deportation at any moment, but will have a chance to get a better deal compared to the moment they were bonded by a bad sponsor.

Indeed, the loan the fishermen had to take in order to go and the work regulations in Oman left the majority of them no choice than taking the path of an irregular stay. That is why I argue that it is absolutely unfair to

blame the men who take this path, who officially become "illegal migrants" (a blame I have often heard in Bangladesh, sometimes even labelling them "a shame to the nation" when they unfortunately end up in jail as undocumented workers). They are indeed trapped in a forced migration.

Staying undocumented represents a constant stress, as one of them, Rafiq, explained, "The risk of being arrested is always in my mind. There is not a minute when I am not afraid, because if I was caught, it would be the end of me. The debt is on my shoulder only and my entire life would not be enough to pay it back."

Although they try their best not to be caught, a majority of them end up being arrested. They are then sent to jail, as is the rule in Oman, after a trial which they do not understand, having no access to a translator. After six months to a year of detention, they are eventually deported, once their family back home has sent the money of the fine they have been sentenced to and which needs to be paid for their release. After a few years of hardship, bearing the shame of having been to prison and of financial failure, they are back in Hatiya. Except for those who got the chance to become a captain and, entered the visa business, none of the men I met had been able to clear the debt which was taken for the departure to Oman. But less than one fisherman in 100 becomes a captain in Oman. It is one risky gamble.

I met with a Union member for a ward in Jahajmara which counts many migrants (half of the poor households of this ward would have somebody in Oman), who clearly stated, "Here, only the poorest go as a desperate move. In the end, this is almost always more debts for the family."

He admitted that the Omani network has brought some small developments in the south of Hatiya (more small shops or motorbike taxis, more solar panels or tube wells), thanks to the remittances of so many migrants. He remarked, however, that the beneficiaries, except for the captains, were not the migrant families, but the one who had lent the money. The price of this migration is certainly high for the fishermen and their family, but also for the local society.

The Chairman of the same village explained, "The problem is that since this Omani network has developed, we face many conflicts. I am constantly called to calm people down. The quarrels are mainly about visa selling and debts that the salish cannot often solve properly, but there are also many family conflicts. This migration trend is not good for our community."

Due to the poor and inadequate remittances of the migrants – not enough for the repayment of the debt – the families of a migrant or ex-migrant have the difficult task to keep their lenders waiting by paying a small sum of money from time to time. Considering their low income and the high rates of interest, this is an endless process. As they generally have several lenders, they may sometimes repay an amount to one and postpone the payment to another who is less pressing or less threatening. This leads to conflicts even between relatives and close neighbours which may end in violence. It seems that women are particularly harassed by lenders looking after their money since they remain at home; insults and curses are

common affairs in this matter.

The migration to Oman has other impacts on the women left behind. Almost all of the migrant wives live in a joint family. In these families, it is the father or the brothers-in-law who manage the remittances that the migrant sends home when he is able to. Women have no say in this matter.

Furthermore, they are fragilised in two ways. As a female neighbour of a migrant wife remarked, for instance, "Poor Nazreen has lost her gold in order to gather part of the money to send her husband. Only her nose ring is left."

The amount of gold a wife may own is apparently sold to help for the departure of a migrant. Worse than that, migrant wives and their children may be sent back to their parents if their husband fails to send enough or no money at all.

Fatima, speaking of her cousin, described a typical case, "For two years, her husband has not been able to send any money. There are three children. For some time, the brothers have taken care of them all, but they could not manage anymore with the debt and so many mouths to feed. It has been a year now that this daughter-in-law is with her father. She took the children with her."

It is difficult to assess the proportion of migrant wives who are suffering such a destiny since it is considered as rather shameful by the in-laws as well as by the wives' parents to speak about it, but such effect of migration on women has regularly been described by the people I met in Hatiya. Considering the poverty of the joint family they live in, it is also not surprising.

In conclusion, I want to warn against the idea of considering this migration as a free individual decision. Not to consider at first the political context leads to underestimate the responsibilities the countries have in the situation these migrants have to face before and after their departure. For instance, in Hatiya, if erosion victims were given land as they are theoretically entitled to, or if a planned development of the island was helping in reducing unemployment, fewer people may want to leave. If the visa business was better controlled (in Bangladesh as well as in Oman), migrants would not be trapped.

Similarly, the hardship Bangladeshi fishermen have to bear in Oman is a result of a policy regarding foreign labour which institutionalises exploitation, mechanically generates "illegal" migration and avoids providing any protection to the foreign workers. When poor people in Hatiya, having no hope of betterment at home, decide to bet everything on a possible good fortune abroad, they are aware of the risk they take but have very limited power about the outcomes of this decision, and are left alone to cope with them.

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PHOTOS: MARIE PERCOT