

GLOBAL SOUTH AND GLOBAL NORTH

Some thoughts about Bangladesh and France

Step by step, Europe is becoming a fortress and the Mediterranean Sea is already the world's biggest cemetery with more than 30,000 people having lost their life in a decade while trying to reach Europe.

MARIE PERCOT

Both my parents had been actively engaged in the struggle for the liberation of Algeria from French colonialism. A few months after its independence, we left France to live in Algiers, sharing the house with two Algerian families whose women, Fatima and Jima, were like other mothers to me. From this joyful childhood and early education probably comes my curiosity for other cultures that led me to eventually become an anthropologist, but also built my high sensitivity towards xenophobic or neo-colonialist behaviours. However, as a white French woman, I definitely do not feel in a position to teach lessons to Bangladeshi readers about neocolonialism, its impact on economy, politics or culture, all the more as distinguished scholars—especially South Asian and African ones—have written on it in a lot more erudite way than I could do. Bangladeshis also certainly know



Spanish NGO Maydayteraneo helping migrants from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan onto a rescue vessel in the international waters near Libya. February 10, 2022.

PHOTO: AFP



(SEBASTIEN SALOM-GOMIS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Protesters from the far-right group "European Brotherhood" participate in an anti-migrant rally in Saint-Brevin-les Pins, France, on February 25, 2023.

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better than me about the arrogance or double standards of the global North regarding human rights in particular. Lately, the shocking difference of treatment between Ukraine and Gaza made it once again painfully obvious. But what I can share here are, more modestly, a few stories and thoughts that come directly from my personal experience as an anthropologist working on South Asian migration, as somebody whose many friends are originated from the global South and also as a lover of the Bangladeshi people.

Local NGOs and their donors

Many Westerners are individually well-intentioned people: they like to help and, particularly, to help people of countries they consider as poor. This certainly comes out of guilt, out of some arrogance, out of genuine generosity sometimes. In this regard, here is a typical anecdote: I once get a call from a French man who had travelled all over Bangladesh pulling himself a rickshaw in a sort of (a bit ridiculous) touristic challenge. He had noticed that rickshaws were not equipped with a hub dynamo to provide light at night. "Willing to help", he wanted to create a small NGO to support Bangladeshi rickshaw pullers in buying and using one. It did not even come to his mind that if there was no dynamo, it was not that rickshaw pullers were

so ignorant or too poor, but just because they do not need it. It also did not come to his mind to ask the opinion of rickshaw pullers at first. On a lot more important scale, I have often observed in Bangladeshi villages a type of behaviour not so far from that coming from international donors of local NGOs. Somewhere in the USA or in some European capital, big NGOs or development agencies set up an agenda of the causes they consider as worth supporting. More and more, local NGOs have thus to fit in this agenda in the hope of getting some funding. During the nearly fifteen years I have been coming to Bangladesh, I have seen, in the same places, programmes shifting rapidly from, for instance, women's rights to elderly people's care or to local governance. I have also been asked by local NGO people my opinion about which action they should propose in order to more surely get international funding. It is not to say that the causes chosen by the international funders are meaningless, but in this process, the actual and more urgent needs of the local communities are not prioritized, the concerned people have no say in what is decided for them and their knowledge or expertise is not taken into account. Considering the weight of NGOs in Bangladesh, this is obviously a clear democratic issue. Although the Western institutions constantly use the word "grassroot" as a mantra when promoting their programmes, the reality—observed from Bangladeshi villages—is a top-down policy in which people do not have much to say regarding their own life. Moreover, the fact local NGOs are accountable to their international funders and not to the Bangladeshi citizens or to their recipients seems also very problematic to me.

Expatriates versus migrants: admired ones and despised ones
In French at least, when Westerners go working abroad, they are designated as "expatriates". People from the global South

who go working abroad are called "migrants". Being an "expatriate" is seen as rather prestigious (because it means a rich cosmopolitan life and, generally, very good conditions of living). But "migrants" are seen as problematic by a growing number of French people. So, the way we speak is already discriminatory. I am old enough to remember how European people, in the name of freedom, were loudly blaming the then Communist countries for not allowing their citizens to leave their homeland and travel. Yet many Westerners seem not to see the contradiction when, today, they back their government which deals with African or Asian countries a ban on the freedom of movement of their own citizens. They

better future abroad, mostly from ex-British or French colonies, 2,000 of them were Bangladeshis.

With a growing influence of the extreme right parties, migrants are increasingly used as scapegoats for any social or economic problem. Lately, in France the house of a mayor was even set on fire because he had accepted the building of a refugee centre in his town. Unwilling to admit the reality that with an ageing population, foreign labour should be welcome, even more reluctant to admit that they have a debt towards countries they are still largely contributing in many ways to impoverish, more and more Europeans are calling to close the door in the idea of thus protecting



Demonstrators in Paris protest the recently passed controversial immigration law on January 14, denouncing potential discrimination against foreigners and demanding the repeal of what they see as a "racist" policy.

had celebrated the demolition of the Berlin wall, but are now supporting the building of walls at every European border in order to ward off a supposed invasion by migrants. Step by step, Europe is becoming a fortress and the Mediterranean Sea is already the world's biggest cemetery with more than 30,000 people having lost their life in a decade while trying to reach Europe. Part of them were refugees seeking asylum, part of them were young people trying to build a

their privileges. These last twenty years, France, for instance, has passed eighteen laws regarding immigration, each of them tougher than the previous one. The last one which was passed a few weeks ago is, among other measures, targeting foreign students so ridiculously that even the President admitted that it m a y deprive France t a l e n t e d people. All of those

xenophobic reflexes have, of course, consequences on all the non-European migrants living in France or people willing to come whatever is their reason. Along with other European countries, the French policy clearly suspects any South country citizen of trying to circumvent the immigration laws when she or he applies for a visa. This has countless poisonous consequences, including in the academic field: many Indian scholars, for instance, rightly decided to boycott French universities in order not to face anymore the humiliation of being denied a visa despite the fact they had official invitations. Although most of them are profoundly ashamed and frustrated of such a situation and make it regularly public, French scholars remain unheard. It has also consequences at a personal level. A few years back, I invited a close Bangladeshi friend to visit me in France. I largely owe him the discovery of the beauties of Bangladesh and of its people and wanted him to also know my country. He is a talented book translator in his fifties, with certainly no intention to come living in Europe. Here too, we had to face the stiff problem of visa. I do not have myself a powerful network and started to tremble in fear that his visa would be denied, anticipating the pain and shame it would be for me. After much formalities and a special recommendation finally found at the last minute, the visa was eventually granted and my friend could come, but I have never been able to get a visa for my Algerian friend, Nissa, with whom I grew up and went to school.

Apart from ethical considerations, the increasing closing of Western borders to South countries' citizens is anyway an absurd and vain policy. The most eminent scholars working on migration and most economists agree on the fact that the Global north needs foreign labour, they also underline this actual evidence that—however high are the walls—it is never possible to stop the movement of people. The result is only a tragic number of deaths, the enrichment of migrant smugglers and the constant increase of irregular migrants, necessary to the Western economies but, in this way, more easily exploitable like are always undocumented migrants.

As for me, I am grateful to Bangladesh each time I am granted a visa since, each time I come, I continue to learn so much from its people, thanks to what they tell me about their country, their culture and values, but also about the rest of the world. By giving me some distance, it is also a chance to see my own society from a different perspective: it has its beauties, it certainly has beautiful people too, but it is not possible either not to be appalled by its ugly aspects.

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This paper is dedicated to Sahel from Sylhet who has eventually, after much hardship, successfully settled in my village. Working in a famous restaurant, he is already, at 19, a specialist of the finest French cuisine.



According to UNHCR, Bangladesh ranks fourth among the most common nationalities of sea arrivals in Europe.