

STRUGGLE, SURVIVAL, SUCCESS

The untold stories of Bangladeshi young migrants in France

MARIE PERCOT

I live in a small town in the west of France with a population of 7,500 inhabitants — hardly a union’s ward for Bangladesh. Four years ago, on my way back from the market, I stopped to chat with a neighbour at the corner of the small lane leading to my house. Suddenly, I thought I heard people speaking Bangla — something very surprising, since the Bengali community in France is still quite small. I walked a few steps closer and saw two young people looking at the few words in Bangla that decorate my front door. I asked them if they were from Bangladesh — a surprise for them as well, since most people in France would more likely assume they were “Indian.” This is how I came to know Sahel and Shimul, who were 17 and 18 at the time, respectively, and were apprentices in the two nearby fine-dining restaurants. Since then, we have stayed in regular contact, and I’ve been introduced to a dozen of their friends living in the area or in Nantes, the nearby metropolis. Over time, I’ve gathered their stories and it was encouraging to see that — although they had to go through multiple hardships — many of them have eventually been following rather successful paths in France.

The exact number of Bangladeshis living in France is not accurately known since not all of them are documented migrants. The most reliable sources estimate that there would be somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 people who started to arrive by the end of the 80s. Most of them arrived claiming political asylum, which many were eventually granted; however, many too were denied this status, and thus remained in France under an irregular status. Almost all of

of trained candidates. Their salaries increase quickly, reaching over €2,000 within just a year or two — even without counting overtime — when the minimum salary in France is €1,400.

All the young Bangladeshis I met were focused on saving as much money as possible, since their goal is to open their own restaurant as soon as they can. For instance, Sahel Mia, who is now 21, opened his a few weeks ago, and his friend Joynal, who is just two years older, moved to the south of France a year ago to take over a fast-food restaurant, just like Sahel. Their maturity and remarkable entrepreneurial spirit are truly noteworthy. Opening a traditional French or “Indian” restaurant — with a large dining room, waitstaff, and so on — would be financially out of reach, at least as a first venture. However, thanks to their savings, securing a bank loan to open a fast-food establishment is relatively feasible, and such a business can become profitable fairly quickly.

Of course, among those who arrived in France, there are also young people whose paths have been far more chaotic. They are difficult to get to know, since as undocumented migrants they are forced to live extremely discreet lives — rarely going out and working off the books, often in the back of restaurant kitchens as dishwashers or cleaners. Among those who left, there are also those — though their number is impossible to determine — who never managed to reach their intended destination, having been deceived by smugglers, and whose journeys ended tragically in Libya or the Mediterranean Sea. For all of them — regardless of future success — the path is marked by a series of hardships that must be overcome.

Not so long ago, I was invited for lunch at the apartment that Sahel shares with a group



these migrants — whether documented or not — arrived in France as adults and now constitute the bulk of the Bangladeshi community established in France.

Around 15 years ago, a new phenomenon emerged: the arrival in France of very young people — children, in fact — who had left Bangladesh and travelled alone. They arrive in France at the age of 15 or 16, full of hope but with very little knowledge about the country they’ve reached. They rarely speak English, almost never know a word of French, and generally don’t know anybody here. The vast majority come from the Sylhet region.

Once they have arrived, these youths have indeed a potential advantage over adult migrants: theoretically, according to French law, children are considered children regardless of their citizenship, and anyone who is recognised as being under eighteen not only cannot be deported, but must also be taken care of by the State. So, any person arriving in France and claiming to be an unaccompanied minor should legally be directly provided with shelter, food, healthcare and education, even before their minority status is officially recognised. Yet, the French State is often failing to fulfil its duty, and a number of these young people are left to cope by themselves in dire conditions: a now common sight in Paris is these rows of tents under which young migrants try to find a fragile shelter. Many NGOs are engaged in helping them deal with the administration for the recognition of their minority, organising canteens to feed them or finding families to host them when needed.

The children are hosted in youth migrant centres or hotels under the supervision of care workers until they have finished their education. For education, they join the mainstream French school system in which they are generally following a two-to-three-year vocational education for occupations that are in high demand in France such as mason, plumber, electrician or cook. It is this last occupation that almost all of the young Bangladeshis in France choose.

As apprentices, they spend half of their time at the local high school and the other half training in the restaurant. After two years, they receive an initial diploma and can choose to complete an additional year to earn a higher-level one. Most young Bangladeshis start working after the first diploma, as they are eager to begin earning more money than the apprentice allowance. Having been trained in French cuisine, it is then not a problem for them to find a job, given the shortage

of friends. The Bangla food was plentiful and delicious. The atmosphere was warm and joyful. Each of them shared their plans with me: one wanted to learn how to prepare Japanese sushi because “it works well in France,” another told me about the girl his family had suggested he marry — someone he would certainly bring back to France — and a third asked me to help him fill out a visa application for a trip to Canada, etc. I left feeling happy for them and full of respect for these young men — so enthusiastic and full of energy.

It would certainly not be wise to encourage young Bangladeshis to take this path, as it is fraught with obstacles and exposes them, from the outset, to the mercy of often unscrupulous smugglers. It is also clear that not all teenagers have the strength or ability to face such an ordeal. Finally, the care provided to unaccompanied minors in France is becoming increasingly strained and will eventually leave more and more youths abandoned by the system. Still, those who succeeded despite everything deserve recognition and admiration.

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UNHEARD VOICES



Women in Kalabagi village shoulder much of the burden, working both indoors and outdoors to keep their families afloat.



A woman from Kalabagi village traces the boundary of her home with her index finger — now in the middle of the river.

STORIES FROM THE HANGING VILLAGE

A community left to fight the sea alone

RAFIQUL ISLAM MONTU

Sagar Sardar and Nasima Begum have no time off. After working outside all day, they now have to repair their house. Their home has collapsed under the pressure of a sudden tide. If they cannot repair it, all the family members will have to live under the open sky. Here, people build hanging houses supported by bamboo poles. River water flows beneath the wooden floors of their homes.

This is the reality in Kalabagi village, set beside the Sundarbans in Dakop upazila of Khulna district on the west coast of Bangladesh. The people of this village live in elevated houses to escape the tidal water. The Fakirkona part of the hanging village became an island after Cyclone Amphan. More than a hundred families are now completely isolated. During high tide, the houses of the hanging village appear from a distance as if they are floating on the water. Once upon a time, people in this area farmed and fished in the river for a living. Now some still fish in the river and work in the Sundarbans. However, many are forced to go elsewhere in search of work. Sagar Sardar and Nasima Begum are among them.

‘My house was here, where the waves of the Shibsa River now flow. My days were going well with work. I used to cover my family expenses by cultivating a little land. But Cyclone Aila came and wiped out everything. We lost our land. Now our means of income are gone. We do not even have a place to live. In the end, we build a house like this. When the tide rises, we raise the wooden platform. Now this is our house. But it is temporary. It breaks down again and again,’ said Sagar Sardar, pointing towards the Shibsa River.

Hanging village, Cyclone Aila’s wound

Like Sagar Sardar’s house, hundreds of homes in Kalabagi village hang from bamboo poles. People have been living in these structures for years. No, no one taught the people of this area this survival technique. They learned from disasters that if they want to live here, they must build houses in this way. All the houses in this village were once on land. There was no need for such hanging structures. Back then, there were courtyards in front of the houses. Children used to play in those courtyards. There were vegetable gardens around the homes. But that life was taken away by the devastating Cyclone Aila in 2009. These were the words of Mobarak Hossain, 65, a daily wage worker from the hanging village.

Abdus Sobahan Gazi, 70, lives in a small hanging house next to Kalabagi market. Even at this age, he goes to

the river by boat. He earns his living by catching crabs. He has changed houses ten times in his life. Once he had a house on solid ground. Now he lives in a hanging house. Sobahan Gazi said that the 1988 cyclone caused the most damage in this area. After that came Cyclone Sidr. The 2009 Cyclone Aila caused extensive damage to Sutarkhali and Kamarkhola unions of Dakop upazila. Among them, Sutarkhali union suffered the most. The area remained underwater for about five years. The houses of Kalabagi were turned into hanging houses after Cyclone Aila struck. The village, once surrounded by greenery, has now become a barren expanse.

Cyclone Aila took away the good times of the people here. Kalabagi earned the new name, ‘hanging village’.



Numerous children in Kalabagi cannot attend school as they must contribute to supporting their families.

The village changed even more after Cyclone Amphan on May 20, 2020. The hanging village broke into two parts due to the strong impact of the cyclone. Now a portion of the village has become an island. About 100 families live on that small island adjacent to the Sundarbans. Local residents said that the level of the tidal waves gradually increased. Finally, people began building houses on high platforms to survive the rising tide. They have been living a very inhuman life for a century.

The misery is increasing

‘The hungry river is coming towards us. Where will we go now? Our village has been completely destroyed. We have changed houses five times since Cyclone Aila hit. Natural disasters have changed the field of work and reduced income. Our precarious life is becoming more precarious,’ said Solaiman Sheikh, 65, of Kalabagi village. Similar experiences were shared by Nani Gopal Mandal, 30, Arun Mandal, 50, and Kamrul Islam, 45.

Solaiman Sheikh said, ‘Whenever a

disaster strikes, we face some kind of loss. And we need money to overcome that loss. Employment opportunities have also shrunk because of the disaster. There is no longer any chance to earn a living by working in the area. Collecting shrimp from the river was our main source of income. But for a few years, the government has banned catching shrimp from the river. As a result, we have to go to outside cities for work. We cannot earn the necessary income there either. Now it has become difficult for us to pull our lives together.’

Rafiqul Islam Khokon, executive director of a Khulna-based non-governmental development organisation, said, ‘After Cyclone Aila, this area has become more vulnerable. Local residents have lost their land due to erosion. As a result, their suffering



Residents of Kalabagi village live in these precariously built hanging houses.

PHOTOS BY RAFIQUUL ISLAM MONTU