

Lived experiences and local spaces: Bangladeshi migrants in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Migration literature tends to speak of temporary migration as economic migration and therefore the experience of migration is centred on the economy. In South Africa, this economic experience includes violence and crime especially after the 2008 xenophobic attacks. Yet migrants have established and forged relations in South Africa that transcend pure economic relationships. In this paper, I argue that the lived experience of Bangladeshi migrants produce a far more complex picture of migration. While the economy may have been the primary reason these men migrated, they are neither poor nor destitute. Further, this paper looks at how the spaces of the home, work and the social are negotiated in the daily lived experience of Bangladeshi migrants in South Africa. It looks at spaces like Fordsburg Johannesburg where the men socialise and find a sense of community among their countrymen, as well how marriage and social mobility.

Keywords: Bangladeshi migrants; Migration; Local; Spaza; Fordsburg; Muslim; Xenopbia.

Introduction

In the vast literature on immigrants living in South Africa, few studies of contemporary migration address the experiences of South Asian migrants. And yet, among the most interesting of these contemporary migrations is the growing movement of Bangladeshi men into townships and small towns across South Africa. These men's lives are complex, and woven into a social web of interactions with both migrant and local South African communities. Understanding the lived experience of Bangladeshi migrants exposes the experience of economic migration, and begins to draw out and examine

South Asian migration without homogenising the migrants, thus recognising the immigrant's local and historical context.¹

The Bangladeshi community that forms the subject of this paper is located in the West Rand, on what is usually classified under the Witwatersrand and Western Highveld region, near Randfontein. The community is based in a small town and township which remain anonymous to protect the identities of the research participants. The economic border between the township and small town is seemingly porous for this community. This paper attempts to understand and show the lived experiences of Bangladeshi migrants in the work, the home and the social. Understanding how the experience of migration is negotiated in these spaces assists us in understanding the lived experiences of migrants in ways that transcend the crudely economic.

For the purposes of this study, I make a distinction between two “waves” of South Asian Migration. The first wave of migration was roughly between 1800-1900 when South Asian migrants came to South Africa as indentured labourers and shop owners.² Many passenger immigrants made a living through entrepreneurship and were known for their entrepreneurial ability. The “second” wave of Bangladeshi migration to South Africa began roughly from the late 1980's and early 1990's to the present day. Prior to 1994, the Bangladeshi government chose not to form diplomatic ties with apartheid South Africa, and it was only in 1994 that diplomatic ties were established between Bangladesh and South Africa.³ With formal relations established between the two countries, migration to South Africa increased. Inheriting a discriminatory and restrictive immigration law, post-apartheid South Africa's immigration laws have tended to remain restrictive and xenophobic.⁴ The experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants follow South Africa's changing immigration policy.⁵ Men who migrated between the late 1980s to the year 2000 tended to acquire Temporary Permanent Residency before

1 An excellent study that accounts for various experiences of different Asian migrant communities is YJ Park, *Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa*, *History and African Studies Seminar* (University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010).

2 G Vahed, “Control and repression: The plight of Indian hawkers and flower sellers in Durban, 1910-1948”, *The International Journal of Historical Studies*, 32(1), 1999, pp. 19-48.

3 Bangladeshi High Commissioner (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 19 September 2011.

4 M Neocosmos, *From “Foreign Natives” to “Native Foreigners”, explaining xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa: Citizenship and nationalism, identity and politics* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2010); J Crush & D McDonald, “Transnationalism, African immigration, and new migrant spaces in South Africa: An Introduction”, J Crush, *Transnationalism, African immigration, and new migrant spaces in South Africa* (Southern African Migration Project, 2002).

5 High Commissioner (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 19 September 2011; Bangladeshi Association (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 7 July 2011.

becoming permanent residents in South Africa.⁶ With stricter regulations and enforcement of the law, the majority of Bangladeshi men now enter as refugees claiming asylum from the political turmoil in Bangladesh. Those who have acquired residency are able to bring their families to live in South Africa if they fulfil all the requirements.⁷

Migration literature transcends across various disciplines. International and regional studies on migration has covered many topics, including migration and globalisation, the law, gender studies.⁸ In South African, scholars have been made to understand migration in context of xenophobia, the South African's state history, politics and laws of migration, and migration and the economy.⁹ Park and Rugunanan research is one of the only studies that have interrogated the experience of South Asian migration in South Africa.¹⁰ I argue that migration literature tends to confine understanding the experience of migration within confines of the economy. Yet, the lived experience of migrants, while it is linked to the economy, transcends the economic space.

While literature often assumes migrants are poor, the men interviewed in this study tended to come from middle class families in Bangladesh, seeking to make a more profitable or decent living. It costs roughly R60 000¹¹ to migrate to South Africa from Bangladesh- which means that migrants must have at

6 Mr Imran and Mr Kabir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 7 July 2011.

7 Mr Kabir and Mr Imran (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 7 July 2011.

8 S Castles, Migration and community formation under conditions of globalisation, *International Migration Review*, 36(4), 2002; R Black, D Kniveton, R Skeldon, D Coppard, A Murata, & K Schmidt-Verkerk, *Demographics and climate change: Future trends and their policy implications for migration* (Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, June 2008); T Siddiqui, Migration and Gender in Asia, *United Nations expert group meeting on international migration and development in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, September 2008); T Siddiqui, "Migration as a livelihood strategy of the poor: The Bangladesh case", *Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit* (Bangladesh, Dhaka University, 2003).

9 J Crush & D McDonald, "Transnationalism, African immigration, and new migrant spaces in South Africa: An introduction", J Crush, *Transnationalism, African immigration, and new migrant spaces in South Africa* (Southern African Migration Project, 2002); L Landau, "Urbanisation, Nativism, and the Rule of Law in South Africa's 'Forbidden' Cities", *Third World Quarterly*, 2005, pp. 1115-1134; M Neocosmos, *From "Foreign Natives" to "Native Foreigners", explaining xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa: Citizenship and nationalism, identity and politics* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2010); J Crush, "South Africa: Policy in the face of Xenophobia", Migration Policy Institute, July 2008 (available at: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=689>), as accessed on 11 November 2011; S Pebery, Transnationalism and non-South African entrepreneurs in South Africa's Small, Medium and Micro-Enterprise (SMME) Economy, JM Crush, *Transnationalism, African immigration, and new migrant spaces in South Africa* (Southern African Migration Project, 2002); Centre for Development Support, "'Trade is in our blood': Reflections on trends and conflicts in township trade", *CDS Research Report, LED and SMME Development, 2010(1)* (Bloemfontein, University of the Free State).

10 YJ Park, "Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa", *History and African Studies Seminar* (University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010).

11 Mr Imran and Mr Kabir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 7 July 2011.

least this much start-up capital to afford to migrate. The men are from the lower middle class segment of Bangladeshi society, and have some financial support from their families back home. Often these men are educated in school, and may have some tertiary education.¹²

Most migrants in this study refer to males. This may be explained by Bangladesh's patriarchal and predominantly Muslim culture in which men are the breadwinners of the family and by custom allowed to travel alone while women are not.¹³ In addition, Bangladesh has a history of legal discriminatory practices against female immigration. That is not to say that there are no Bangladeshi women who reside in South Africa, but rather that their patterns of migration are quite different. They tend to come as wives and daughters and in my research I have come across no Bangladeshi woman migrants.

Bangladesh is a poor, overpopulated country, which battles with high unemployment and political instability.¹⁴ South Africa is one of many destinations for Bangladeshi migrants which include the Middle East, Singapore, Korea and China. There are approximately 7 million Bangladeshis living abroad. In September 2011, the Bangladeshi High Commissioner estimated that there are roughly five to ten thousand Bangladeshis with full South African citizenship, and approximately forty to fifty thousand Bangladeshis living in South Africa legally and illegally.¹⁵ Existing family and kinship networks, and the perceived economic opportunities, has made post-apartheid South Africa the destination of choice for these migrants.

In the township, where economic opportunities appear largest, these men work long hours as shop owners selling basic food and household items. They go home to relatively small spaces located in a partitioned or adjacent room at the back of the shop. The married men go home to a flat, completely

12 Interviews with Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 26 June 2011; Mr Imran & Mr Kabir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 7 July 2011. It should be noted that the men I interviewed were shop keepers not the managers/workers. Managers are generally poorer, tended to not speak English and lived in the shops.

13 T Siddiqui, Migration and gender in Asia, *United Nations expert group meeting on international migration and development in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, September 2008).

14 T Siddiqui, Migration as a livelihood strategy of the poor: The Bangladesh case, *Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit* (Bangladesh, Dhaka University, 2003); YJ Park, "Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa", *History and African Studies Seminar*, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010.

15 Bangladeshi High Commissioner (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 19 September 2011. Being in office for only three weeks, the High Commissioner could not provide a more substantial breakdown of immigration to South Africa. Questions I asked regarded a demographic breakdown of the men, the kinds of economic activities that the men get involved in, and where the men are located in South Africa.

separated from the shop, where their family resides. In between they socialise among the Bangladeshi community in the township, and in the largely Indian populated suburb called Fordsburg, located in Johannesburg. Fordsburg has a predominantly Indian and Muslim population with a number of restaurants and many shops catering to a Muslim Indian community, selling Indian clothing, food spice and music. A number of restaurants are successfully owned by Bangladeshi men, and it is where the headquarters for the Bangladeshi Association is situated. It is here, outside the spaces of work and often outside the spaces of home, that the influence of family and kinship networks can be seen. The article will examine each of these spaces – of the shop, of home, and of socialisation in between – in turn. It highlights the ways in which lived experience is formed in these spaces, and how these relate to issues race, class, violence, family, economic migration, and importantly, lived experiences of migration as rooted in a local historical context.

The economy: Successful entrepreneurship, social hierarchies and the impact of xenophobia and crime

While South Africa has provided Bangladeshi men with economic opportunities, few are able to access waged jobs unless they are highly skilled. Instead, the “spaza” or grocery shop provides a viable means of working that is profitable and provides the men with a sense of ownership in their lives.¹⁶ The shop is thus the primary location where Bangladeshi migrants spend the majority of their time. In considering the spaces of the shop, and the lived experience of migrants in it, the paper first considers the ways in which work is done.

The success of the Bangladeshi men’s businesses is in part due to their hard work and long hours of labour. On an average day, they spend approximately twelve hours a day in the shop, seven days a week.¹⁷ They work at times from 7am till 8pm attracting customers shopping at the end of the working day.¹⁸ There is wide variety of goods sold in the shops ranging from food items such as bread, milk, fruits, frozen chicken, and canned food to toiletries and household cleaning detergents, to umbrellas. In some shops cosmetic items such as hair

16 Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 26 June 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011.

17 Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011; Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 26 June 2011.

18 Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011; Mr Zahir, (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 26 June 2011.

pieces and nail polish are sold. It is interesting to note that one Bangladeshi trader decided to sell fish. This is significant because his target market was not the local population, but rather the Bangladeshi population in the township whom preferred a diet of fish over meat. However, more generally, it is by stocking goods that cater for a wide range of their customers, and locating their shops in close proximity to these customers, that the Bangladeshi community have been able to remain successful and competitive.¹⁹

South Africa's history of racial politics has given these Bangladeshi men a significant economic advantage over other potential shopkeepers. They are able to buy goods on credit from local South African Indian shop owners located in the small town beside the township. African shop owners are not trusted to pay back money loaned on credit, and this gives the Bangladeshi shop owners a significant business advantage as they are able to stock up on goods at anytime of the month if they run out.²⁰ Thus the shop, rooted in a post-apartheid South African context, is a site of social and political contestation as well as hard work.

In the community on the West Rand, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of Bangladeshi shops in the township and the small town (located approximately 10 minutes away). In 2005, there were approximately two Bangladeshi owned shops. By 2007 there were five to six Bangladeshi owned shops, and by 2011 there were approximately twenty Bangladeshi owned shops.²¹ These figures are rough estimates, but they point to the phenomenal growth of the immigrant community in the township. It is even more astonishing when taking into account the growing presence of other South Asian and African immigrants in the township. This growth has fuelled tensions among the immigrant communities for competing businesses opportunities.

The men claim they have found a gap in the market and that prior to their presence in the township, residents had to travel to town to get basic household goods. However, this is contested by the community. A South African interviewee from the community, who is married to a Bangladeshi man, said that whilst she agrees that the men have found a gap in the market,

19 Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011.

20 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011; Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 14 August 2011.

21 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011; Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 14 August 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011.

for many locals in the townships, the success of the immigrant's business has been at local expense.²² A study by the Centre for Development Support at the University of the Free State looked at traders in Mangaung township in the Free State who were mostly of Bangladesh or Pakistani origin. The study found that large number of successful immigrant owned shops have:²³

... created the perception that these so-called foreigners have ousted the South African informal traders in the former black townships. Consequently, the business climate in former black townships (Mangaung included), has become volatile, with sporadic claims from these non-South Africans that they are the victims of township unrest and xenophobia, while South African informal traders have, in turn, blamed the government for failing to protect them against illegitimate foreign traders.

While the situation in township I studied is not as tense as it is in Mangaung, there is certainly tension in the community as more local shops close down.

The 2008 xenophobic attacks put the spotlight on increasing and growing violence against migrants in townships. In my interviews, there was interestingly only one incident described as xenophobic, where a shop was looted.²⁴ Even then, there was a hesitancy to claim that the attack was motivated by xenophobia. Instead, it is understood in context of "service delivery protests", where people are mobilised and angry, and take their anger out on "makulas", the local name for South Asian migrants. When there is no unrest the "makulas" are safe. One way the Bangladeshi men manage these tensions is through monetary contributions towards the communities' upliftment.²⁵ When community members approach a shop for donations, it is expected that a donation is given. The assumption is that the community allow the shop owners to live and run successful businesses, and the shop owners must give back to and contribute to the upliftment of the community.

Xenophobia may not be a major concern, but crime and violent crime certainly is.²⁶ Security measures are jarringly evident: metal gates, barbed wire and locks often bar access to the shop. In spaza shops, customers do not enter the premises, but are instead served through a metal grille. In bigger

22 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011.

23 Centre for Development Support, "'Trade is in our blood': Reflections on trends and conflicts in township trade", *CDS Research Report, LED and SMME Development, 2010(1)*, Bloemfontein, University of the Free State.

24 This incident was described by Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011.

25 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011.

26 Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 14 August 2011; Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011.

shops, customers enter the shop and chose the items they require, often under a watchful gaze from shop assistants. These assistants are always present. Many Bangladeshi shop assistants sleep in a room adjacent to the shop. This is explained as being due to high levels of crime. My informants told me that criminals have become so efficient that they enter the shops through the ceiling, and barbed wire has to be lined on the inside ceiling.²⁷

These findings are consistent with a study by Park and Rugunanan which finds that Asian migrants are victims of high levels of crime as “South Africans are aware that migrants often do not use the formal banking system, carry and keep significant quantities of cash, often have insufficient security systems, and seldom report crimes.”²⁸ The same study found that indeed migrants fear crime and harassment more than possible xenophobic related attacks. Yet, they argue that there exists a “high degree of contentment amongst the Asian migrants with their lives in South Africa and their high levels of adjustment. They perceive South Africa to be a land of opportunity and aside from the crime, are very happy to make this their future home.”²⁹

These tensions between the migrants and the local residents of this community, however, are not so simply resolved. These tensions are shaped and mediated by the fact that the Bangladeshi shop owners do not actually own land. Instead, many rent premises from the local community, including local shop owners.³⁰ Bangladeshi traders have a reputation of being successful businessmen who are willing to pay high rentals, and thus South African shop owners are willing to, and sometimes actively look for Bangladeshi’s to rent their property.³¹ Ownership of the shop varies from individual ownership to partnerships. Partnerships in smaller shops tend to be between two people, while larger grocery shops may have two to four people acquiring “shares” in the shop. Among the Bangladeshi community there is a class distinction between owners and managers of the shop.

27 Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011.

28 YJ Park, “Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa”, *History and African Studies Seminar*, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010, p. 11.

29 YJ Park, “Visible and vulnerable: Asian migrant communities in South Africa”, *History and African Studies Seminar*, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2010, p. 14.

30 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011; Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 14 August 2011; Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011; Mr Hasan (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 29 June 2011.

31 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011.

A clear class distinction exists between shop owners and managers.³² My research has focused on those shop-owners who tend to have spent a significant period of time in South Africa, have some form of capital, speak English, and display social mobility.³³ Managers of spaza shops generally do not speak English and live in a room at the back of the shop separated by a curtain; while in the larger shops the home is a separated by an almost adjacent room to the shop, with a direct entrance leading into the shop. Barely separated from one another, the public space of the shop is somewhat merged with the private space of the home.³⁴ Managers in smaller shops tend to be family members. Having a cousin, wife or nephew manage the shop, while the owner is out buying stock or working in shifts, allows the shop to be open daily for longer hours.³⁵ Further, the extended social hierarchy between Bangladeshi shop owners, Bangladeshi shop managers and African shop assistants. When and if additional assistance is needed to run the shop, particularly (but not exclusively) in shops with bigger premises, local South Africans are employed to do the manual labour and attend to customers.³⁶ This presents an interesting lens from which to understand the social and racial tensions within the townships, and how the hierarchy becomes systemically embedded in the relationship between the immigrant and the local.

The structures of Bangladeshi migrant communities are thus themselves stratified and complex. Nonetheless, both main groups share a continuing economic connection with Bangladesh. Both shop owner and managers sent remittances back home. Afsar argues that in Bangladesh, migration has direct and indirect benefits. Migration can:³⁷

... improve the economic situation of the migrants' households, reduce the unemployment rate, increase the country's foreign exchange earnings, and, through remittances, positively impact national economic growth. Remittances also indirectly assist in generating employment opportunities

32 This is primarily based on ethnographic evidence, from the time I spent in the shops, with the owners who employ managers and through attempted conversation with Bangladeshi men I knew were not owners but employees.

33 Language affected my methodology. In depth interviews were conducted with shop owners only as they spoke better English. Through ethnographic research I managed to speak to a few managers of shops who spoke very limited and broken English. I could only gather very limited impressions about their lifestyle or thoughts on South Africa. Predominantly, it was through ethnographic observations and interviews with shop owners that I drew limited conclusions about their lifestyles.

34 I address the living conditions, and the space of the home below.

35 Mr Zahir (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 14 August 2011; Mr Arif (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011.

36 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011 and ethnographic observations.

37 R Afsar, "Unravelling the vicious cycle of recruitment: Labour migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States", *Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies*, (p. Working Paper, International Labour Office, 2009), p. 1.

and in facilitating trade. Furthermore, monies sent home by migrant workers lay a better foundation for human capital development, as expenditure on children's education tends to increase significantly as a result of migration.

Mr Rasheed's first wife lives in Bangladesh and he has to support her. As a shop owner, he manages and sends remittances on behalf of his staff to their families. Mr Zahir argues that, culturally, Bangladesh is Muslim country and it frowned upon for woman to travel. Mr Zahir is married to a South African woman from the township; he sends remittances to his parents, who had paid his airfare to South Africa. This provides a shared experience that might bind together the stratified Bangladeshi migrant community. The practice of remitting capital back to Bangladesh may also play a role in sustaining tensions within the community – but this is, at this stage, speculative.

The home: Negotiating family, marriage and permanent life in South Africa

This section deals with the social and familial interactions of the Bangladeshi men. It provides a closer look at marriage, through lives of two South African women married to Bangladeshi men.

The Bangladeshi men have settled and created a community for themselves in the township and small town on the West Rand. They have chosen not to live in the largely Indian residential area located approximately 25 kilometres away, and despite preferring to live in the town, they live and work in the township and small town. Many are fairly settled and happy in the area. Their level of interaction with the local community varies, and perhaps most interesting is the contested topic of marriage to South African women. For the businessmen in Fordsburg, and the High Commissioner, the issue of marriage to local African woman was shameful, especially because it was based on the assumption that local African woman were not Muslim woman. For men like Mr Arif, who is young and unmarried, only an Indian Muslim woman is considered to be a suitable partner. For someone like Mr Hasan, however, who has been living in South Africa for a long time and has worked in many places in Gauteng, the situation is more complex. He will not marry an African woman and while he once considered a relationship with a South African Indian Muslim woman, he no longer does. He argues that his experience in South Africa led him to the conclusion that South African Indian women are not the same as Bangladeshi Muslim women, and therefore he hopes to marry

a Bangladeshi woman.

In comparison, men like Mr Rasheed and Mr Zahir have extended their relation to the community by marrying local South African women. Mrs Refilwe is married to Mr Rasheed, and Mrs Tasneem is married to Mr Zahir. Both women now live in the town but still have family residing in the township.

One of the aims of this paper is to shift the analysis of migration beyond an analysis centred on the economy. In an effort to do so, I have focused on the lived experience of Bangladeshi immigrants in a South African town and township. I want to diverge slightly and look at the life experience of the two women, Mrs Rasheed and Mr Tasneem, married to Bangladeshi immigrants, and how their stories highlight the importance of the home and the social space in understanding migration.

*Mrs Refilwe and the Bangladeshi*³⁸

Mrs Refilwe was born in 1974 in the Eastern. At the age of 23, she moved to the township on the West Rand in search of a job. During his time, she met the father of her two children who she later became estranged. In 2005, she met Mr Rasheed as a frequent customer to his shop and later her employer whom she married in 2006. At his insistence, she moved to town, because it provided a safer and better lifestyle than life in the township.

With her husband's support, she completed her matric and completed a number of short courses in an effort to find a job and assist her mother. While Mr Rasheed assists her, he was married before, and sends remittances to his first wife who lives in Bangladesh. During the course of my research, he was visiting Bangladesh, and according to Mrs Refilwe, he was in the process of building a home for her in Bangladesh so that one day she can go home and visit his family.

Mrs Refilwe received mixed responses from community members when she decided to marry a Bangladeshi man. She told a story where a man from the community asked why she is marrying a "makula" and not an African man. Mrs Refilwe is happily married to Mr Rasheed. His insistence on finding a bigger place to live so that she children could live with her and so that her

38 Mrs Refilwe (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 20 June 2011.

children could “eat what you eat” is what attracts her to him. Her children attend private school, where they are taught English. This is a solution to the language barriers and trouble they have understanding one another. Her family, whilst initially shocked that she wanted to marry a Bangladeshi man, was accepting of her marriage. A Muslim man, Mr Rasheed wanted Mrs Refilwe to convert to Islam. A strong and independent woman, it was only in 2010, four years after her marriage, when she felt she had enough knowledge on Islam and that the religion appealed to her, that she decided to convert.

Mrs Tasneem’s Bangladeshi relations³⁹

Born in 1987, in Giyani, Limpopo, Mrs Tasneem spent most of her childhood living in Giyani. In grade 8 she moved to the township in the West Rand to live with her parents. It was also in grade 8 that Mrs Tasneem converted to Islam. When asked what attracted her to the religion, she responded that it was the modest way in which Muslims dress and left school to attend a Madressa (Muslim school) in Verulam, KwaZulu Natal. When she returned home during school holidays 2006, she met Mr Zahir as a customer in his shop whom she married one year later in 2007. They lived in township for three and half years but faced many problems with their landlord who, according to Mrs Tasneem, was angry that Mr Zahir did not marry her daughter. Today, the couple is much happier after moving to the town and opening a shop on rented premises within the town. Yet, despite being settled in South Africa, Mr Zahir, who is the oldest in his family, will not bring his siblings to live in South Africa due to his experiences of violent crime in South Africa.

When asked about married life, Mrs Tasneem admitted that she found marriage initially “scary” given the cultural differences between her and her husband. She had to learn to cook the way Bangladeshis do, and they had to learn to accommodate each other. She said that it is easier now they have become accustomed to their lifestyle. The death of their child in 2008, two days after birth, put a strain on her marriage and took over a year for her to recover. Much stronger now, she hopes to bear children. Mrs Tasneem communicates telephonically with Mr Zahir’s family back home in Bangladesh. At the time of my research, they were excitedly planning a trip to Bangladesh, which would be the first time she would meet his family.

39 Mrs Tasneem (Personal Collection), Interview, N Munshi, 3 July 2011.

When asked about her relationship to the Bangladeshi community in the township, Ms Tasneem said that she is welcomed in the community. The men relate to her well, and are especially happy that she is a practicing Muslim. As a sign of respect, they call her “Bhabi” which is a respectable term meaning “sister-in-law”. Unlike Mrs Refilwe, Mrs Tasneem did not face much hostility when she married a Bangladeshi man. Her family and friends quickly accepted her marriage. Religion is closely linked to one’s identity and it is clear that the important role that Islam plays in both their lives made it easier to relate to each other, and envisage a life together.

The similarities and differences between the two couples present interesting tools of analysis. After marriage, both men relocated to live in the town. The movement out of township can be seen as an upward trajectory for these men. Life in the township is thought to be unstable and the men are constantly fearful of crime. The movement of both men to the town ties into a broader understanding of marriage among the Bangladeshi community. According to the High Commissioner and business men from the Bangladeshi Association, it is seen as undesirable for men to bring up families in such an environment. If these sentiments are echoed by the men living in township, it makes sense that upon marriage, and when they could afford to do so, both couples moved to the small town which is understood to present a safer and more stable lifestyle.

Both Mr Rasheed and Mr Zahir, whilst they rent premises, own their own shops and do not work as managers for someone else. They have also been in South Africa for a fairly significant amount of time and speak English relatively well. I would argue that the fact that they own their own businesses places them at an advantage to other Bangladeshi men. Mr Rasheed own four shops, while Mr Zahir owns a shop in the town and still has shares in the township shop where he used to work. Currently, that shop is managed by his uncle.

These marriages are both interracial and intercultural. The way in which these marriages are negotiated is important to understand the reactions of local communities and how individuals respond to migration. The fact that women have learned to cook in a Bangladeshi style; that Mr Zahir has accepted a permanent life in South Africa and does not plan to return to Bangladesh except to visit his family; that Mrs Refilweis learning to understand the Bengali language and the same time teaches her husband Tswana; and that their families have been accepting and supportive of the marriages all suggest

a response by the men and community to adjust, adapt, and negotiate the impact that migration has played in their lives. It is through these ordinary experiences that we learn that the experience of migration transcends a purely economic experience.

Between shop and home: Spaces of socialisation

This section deals with the social interactions of the Bangladeshi men. It explores the relationship between the Bangladeshi men and the local community as well as the men and the broader Bangladeshi community located in Gauteng.

The majority of the men I interviewed, including Mr Zahir, stated that their relationship to the local community in the town and township is confined to that of the customer-shop owner relationship. While the men have developed good relations with their customers, this relationship seems to not extend much beyond the shop. Mr Zahir whose was a customer to his shop, interestingly still describes his relationship to the community as not extending beyond a customer-shop owner relationship. Racial politics are present in these relationships. The economic activities and social relationships (especially with marriage to local women) of the men are affected by xenophobic tensions and more importantly violent crime. The Bangladeshi traders are not welcomed by everyone in the community. Mr Arif makes it clear that he does not socialise in the community because he does not “trust” the community. While he has a good relationship with his customers, he prefers going outside the community to socialise. Mr Hassan flatly stated he does not socialise with the community residing in the township. A majority of the men relate personal and often traumatic experiences of violent crime, which has clouded their perception and adds to the tensions and (mis)conceptions of the communities in which they reside.

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, and religion plays an important role in the lives of its citizens. South Africa protects and respects its citizen's right to religious freedom, and this is appreciated by the men. Mr Zahir explains that the “South African government also is nice. They don't give trouble like other religions people. Even local people also respect us”.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ An explanation of the terminology he uses: *Halaal* food is food prepared according to Islamic custom. *Masjid* is the equivalent of a church, *Tablig Jamaat* is one of the popular religious groups and *Haj* is Muslim pilgrimage.

The Bangladeshi community is spread across provinces, towns, rural communities and township in South Africa. The men I interviewed have connections to the Bangladeshi communities residing in other areas across South Africa, specifically Fordsburg, Johannesburg, and the Free State. With a growing and sizable network in the area, Bangladeshi men have started to make a home for themselves in the community.

Fordsburg, located approximately just over an hour from the township, plays an important role in the men's lives. Mr Zahir explained that "you know its special when our-self, when we find Indian, Pakistani, Bangladesh we think we are one people. We are Muslim people, our heart get happy". If he could afford to rent a shop in Fordsburg he would move. Mr Arif, who once lived in Johannesburg, sometimes spends overnight visits at his friends in Fordsburg. There are many Bangladeshi owned restaurants in Fordsburg, such as those owned by Mr Imran and Kabir who are members of the Bangladeshi Association. Given the importance of the area, and the support and friendship networks it provides, it seems fitting the Bangladeshi Association is located in Fordsburg. The association sometimes celebrates important days in the Bangladeshi calendar and members are called to join in the celebrations.

One of the sites in which socialisation in Fordsburg is the Bukhara⁴¹ restaurant. Founded by Mr Imran and Kabir, they explained that the restaurant plays a significant role for the Bangladeshi community, particularly for men who have just migrated to South Africa and head straight to Fordsburg. At the restaurant, they are fed and given a chance to rest for approximately two days before being offered an opportunity to stay and work in the restaurant or to leave and earn a living on their own. The men who chose to stay and work in the restaurant (or one of the other restaurants owned by Mr Imran and Kabir in Fordsburg) are trained for a period of three months before becoming full time employees. According to the owners, these men are given valuable training on how to run a restaurant professionally, and to tailor your restaurant to the customers' liking. Further, working at the restaurant provides the men a means of earning and saving money so they can move on to opening a 'tuck-shop' or 'spaza-shop' and living independent lifestyles. Some of the men who leave but do not like the township life, which has reputation for its high crime rate and its hard working life, return to work at the restaurant or one of its branches.

⁴¹ The restaurant is owned by Mr Imran and Kabir. In order to protect their identities, the name of the restaurant has been changed.

This narrative diverges from and confirms some my findings. The men I interviewed arrived in South Africa due to some established network, and settled in locations based on these networks. I am not sure if the men who arrive at the restaurants do so because they do not have access to such established networks. It is clear however that Fordsburg presents the men with a support network to tap into. Once again, we see formation of business partnerships between Mr Imran and Kabir in running Bukhara restaurant.

Bukhara only employs Bangladeshi waiters in the restaurant. African employees usually work in the back kitchens. Clear racial and national tensions exist in the restaurant which caters mainly to South African Muslim Indians. Mr Imran and Mr Kabir complain that the customers are fussy. Located in predominantly Muslim area, all food needs to be halaal⁴² and no alcohol can be served at the restaurant. Further, customers complain in writing when they are served by African waiters and they prefer Bangladeshi or Indian waiters for hygiene and language reasons. Thus, most of the African employees work in the back kitchens, and are very rarely seen in the same spaces as customers. It seems that as long as the customers do not have to interact with African employees, they are happy. Racism is not the only social tension that exists. Most African men employed by Bukhara are not South African, but come from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and Ethiopia. Mr Imran and Kabir argue that South African Africans do not like the working conditions at the restaurant, nor do they like the working hours which require them to work on weekends. An interesting debate between the shop owners ensued regarding the employment of non-South Africans in the different non-Bangladeshi owned restaurants in Fordsburg. While the restaurants certainly create employment, the employment of African immigrants in a context of xenophobia is a contentious issue. The case of Bukhara restaurant is interesting because it is a place where foreigners (Bangladeshis) are creating jobs, and where foreigners (from the African continent) are their preferred employees. Further, in the context of South Africa's racial history, the tensions between Indians and Africans cannot be ignored. These tensions not only exist between the South African Indian customers and African employees, but also between the Bangladeshi employers and the African employees.

Bukhara restaurant is not the only Bangladeshi restaurant in Fordsburg owned by Mr Imran and Mr Kabir. Jhaubon⁴³ restaurant, located on the same street as

⁴² Meaning all food must be prepared according to Islamic custom.

⁴³ In order to protect their identities, the name of the restaurant has been changed.

Bukhara, targets Bangladeshi men as customers. The bachelor lifestyle of these men may explain the rise of the restaurant which serves Bangladeshi food, and is described by the owners as a space where the men are comfortable and can interact and behave in manners which are socially inappropriate in a mixed environment. TV stations are tuned to Bangladeshi news and the men able to socialise and express themselves freely among fellow countrymen. Certainly the bachelor lifestyles of the men have led to tensions within the Bangladeshi community. An example discussed above, is the men's relationship to South African woman, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Conclusion: Understanding migration patterns

In this article the lived experiences of Bangladeshi migrants in the spaces of the shop, the home, and the social in small town and township of South Africa were observed in some detail. While international migration literature tends to assume economic migrants are destitute, seeking a living on the margins of society, the experience of Bangladeshi immigrants in the West Rand, near Randfontein, does not fit that description. These men are economic migrants who spend hours in their shops and buying goods to sell. Yet the shop is not simply a site of economic activity.

During South Africa's political transition in the early 1990's, a "new" wave of South Asian migration to South Africa began. Migration patterns have been affected by increasing globalisation and technology making migration easier.⁴⁴ In search for job opportunities and better lifestyles, the men migrate through established kinship networks.

In a historically black township on the West Rand, the presence of an immigrant trading communities have impacted on the community. Competition for customers is rife among the local and increasing foreign businesses. Negotiating this economic climate, Bangladeshi shop owners have been relatively successful, and their presence in this community has expanded rapidly. Racial tensions between African and the "new" Indian population do exist. The Bangladeshi men do not feel safe or trust the local African population in the townships within which they reside and choose not socialise with the local African population. These tensions are complicated

⁴⁴ S Castles, Migration and community formation under conditions of globalisation, *International Migration Review*, 36(4), 2002.

by the very real and often violent experiences of crime that the Bangladeshi men have faced. It is also complicated by the high economic competition within the township and the resentment this has created from the local South African population. This tension is compounded by the ability of Bangladeshi traders to buy goods on credit from local South African Indian traders who do not trust African traders. This gives the Bangladeshi businessmen a distinct advantage over other traders. In a country which recently experienced violent xenophobic attacks, these issues are sensitive and this community seems to have managed and negotiated these tensions with relative success.

The shop is not just a site of economic activity as many of the men's home are virtually linked to the shop, and located on the same premises. This means that an entire day is often spent in one location. A clear class distinction has emerged between shop owners and managers. This class distinction was evident in the social mobility and proficiency in the English language displayed by the shop owners. These shop owners tend to have spent more time in South Africa than the shop managers. It should be noted that shop owners still generally rent premises and do not own the land. This social hierarchy in the shop is extended by the hiring of local African men and woman as shop assistants.

The Bangladeshi community on the West Rand is a small community connected to one another and there is a sense of a community among themselves. Their relationship to the local South African community within which they reside and trade however, is often confined to a shop owner-customer relationship. Marriage of at least two Bangladeshi men to South African woman from the township is one social relationship that disrupts this pattern of non-socialisation. These marriages further complicate the assumption that economic migrants are temporary migrants. The men have settled into the community, and have forged lasting relationships in South Africa. The trajectory from bachelor life to married life is linked to social mobility and has resulted in the relocation from township life to the town. Marriage has presented new challenges for migrants to negotiate and the experience of economic migration has expanded to include a more cultural and family orientated experience. This has impacted on the identities and social relations of these migrants which are constantly changing.

Established support networks such as kinship networks and more formalised structures like the Bangladeshi Association have facilitated and eased the experience of migration. Formalised networks are a sign of the increasing rootedness of this community in South Africa. Restaurants like Jhaubon, and

the man who sells fish in the township to cater to the Bangladeshi community, are examples of how the bachelor men have actively attempted to create a sense of belonging and comfortable lifestyles in South Africa. The religious freedom that South Africa provides has provided a significant level of comfort for the Bangladeshi migrants.

As the Bangladeshi community in South Africa grows, South Africa needs to consider its impact on the South African economy and demographic make up of the country. The lived experiences of the migrants assists in understanding why the Bangladeshi community are successful in their businesses; what is the impact of migration on the South African communities and immigrant communities and how do they confront issues of xenophobia and crime. Finally, it assists us to understand changes in patterns of migration, such as changes from temporary to permanent migration.

