

International Migration and the “Moral” Economy of the ‘Barani’ Peasantry

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For James Scott, the cornerstone of the ‘moral’ economy was an attitude of a subsistence and basically risk-averse-peasantry which was elementally geared towards enhancing safety and the reliability of its subsistence [Scott (1976)]. It was the need to be secure and the fear of poverty, he submitted, which explained “...many otherwise anomolous, technical and moral arrangements in peasant society” [*op.cit.*: vii]. Commensurately, all coping strategies were noted to fundamentally incorporate these arrangements. Though Scott’s affirmations are based on the analysis of rural Indo-China they also, to a great extent, ring true of many peasant societies of South Asia. The peasantry inhabiting the ‘barani’ (rainfed agricultural) areas of northern Pakistan provide us with one such example. In the course of ascertaining the impact of the recently massive out-country movements of labour from the region to the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, it was found that here too a similar, and integral, subsistence ethic held sway over the “many otherwise anomolous” structural arrangements of life.

The examination, in general, of the out-migrations from “barani” areas [which historically have constituted perhaps, the most effective element of coping strategies of the inhabitants see Darling (1945); Naseem (1981)], and specifically the recent movements to the oil-producing economies is with a view to assessing their ability to nurture a structural transformation in the sending areas. In so doing this paper will attempt to illustrate the attributes of the subsistence ethic in the ‘barani’ lands. It is more in the vein of a conceptual presentation although the affirmations are based on surveys of two villages; one in the Punjab and the other in the NWFP. It argues that there is an overriding logic behind the disparate economic actions of the ‘barani’ dwellers which goes beyond “material” concerns. These diverse actions, though they may not adhere to a concept of a pure ‘economic and utilitarian rationality’, are rational and essentially dictated by a certain *willed order* which reflects simultaneously the various (i.e. economic, political, social and

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cultural) dimensions of a *deliberately organised* structure of life; 'deliberately organised' so that it can best safeguard the interests of the members of society.

I. THE FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE

The "Motivational" Concerns

The quintessence of the articulated 'subsistence ethic' is that all strategies are designed and all responses undertaken, primarily to mitigate the dire conditions of existence. The technical arrangements are evidenced in the use of time honoured techniques, cropping patterns, etc., which are known to yield desired results. Similarly, subsistence conditions have forced certain unique forms of social structural arrangements. These arrangements are based on the fundamental principle of; 'safety in numbers'. This is applied at the level of a family to that of larger groups including relatives and friends. The economics of living close to the margin are such that a small disaster or misfortune, which is never far away, could lead a household to debt and poverty from which it alone cannot hope to escape. The evolved social patterns of kinship and reciprocity and worksharing are all designed to minimise poverty and are better able to promote the welfare of the inhabitants [see for instance Scott (1976); Friedman (1980), p. 165; Ellis (1988), pp.10-11]. It is within this context that survival strategies of households and/or kinship groups are structured.

Migration is facilitated in this environment by certain built-in forms of social services which are operated through the traditional kinship groups. Villagers are born into these structures which define the values and the conduct of society. It is within this framework that they aim to establish security in life. A strengthening of these structures denotes an increase in security. Life in the 'barani' areas proceeds under the "principles and logic of a certain willed order". However, there is an economic rationality to these structures but, as Godelier has explained, "...the rationality of the economic behaviour of the members of a society is seen (to be) an aspect of a wider fundamental rationality, that of functioning of societies" [Godelier (1972), p. 292].

How these structures are shaped, and the context within which the guidelines for decision-making behaviour are situated, is an important consideration in the analysis, not only of out-migration but also of the subsequent behaviour associated with the migration process (e.g. utilisation of remittances, return migration). Once migration is established as part and parcel of life in the region, it may be considered as a preferred alternative among the various choices that are

Giving assistance to a household in need becomes an obligation for other households in the 'biraderi', because what happens to one household reflects on the 'biraderi' and vice versa. In this vein if the migration of a "member" is beyond a household's economic capability, it is often facilitated by other households of the 'biraderi'. Similarly, through the enhancement of the socio-economic status of the migrant household, the other households of the 'biraderi' can also hope to benefit in the future. In short, the 'biraderi' functions as a cornerstone of social and economic life in the 'barani' areas; as a provider of welfare, and as a financial and advice service. A household without a 'biraderi' is deprived of an essential medium of social life, and this also has a strong bearing on its economic survival through the ancillary services foregone.

The value of such structures has given the 'barani' peasantry—what Scott has called—a "Brechtian" tenacity in the face of externally imposed policy decisions. Any exogenous measures which do not recognise and work within these social arrangements will often fail. Thus, while the arrangements and functions of the social set-up may not seem to entail a structured scientific logic "... these superficially odd practices..." as Lipton noted,...(do) make sense as disguised forms of insurance" [Lipton (1969), p. 341].

II. THE DESCRIBED PATTERN

'Selectivity' in Migration: Who Left

The high incidence of migration from the 'barani' area has been attributed to there being insufficient income-earning opportunities. However, it is a fallacy to conclude that since it is the poorer areas which are most prone to migration, it is also the 'poorest' who migrate [see Lipton (1982), p. 201; Dasgupta and Laishley (1975)]. The desire of a household to send a member abroad is one thing, whether the unit is actually able to do so totally another. Analysing the causes of migration through developments in the 'barani' areas enables us to distinguish migrants within a socio-economic frame of reference. In the first instance, the question is not simply one of knowing *who* is being affected but also *how* are they being affected, and consequently *who* leaves.

International migration also requires a significant capital outlay, which in the 'barani' areas is often beyond the scope of a single household. The capability of a unit to undertake migration is then conditional upon its ability to raise capital which, in turn, depends upon the household's credit profile within the framework

linked to the motivational objectives of the household. When presented with the opportunity to migrate, the households choose members who they feel are not only most compatible with the requirements of labour demand, but who would also be best able to fulfil the, howsoever, *defined objectives* of the household.

The Migrant Profile

The migrant profile established from the village surveys shows that the overwhelming majority of the migrants were single, young males, mostly in the 24–35 years category; the major concentration being in the 26–32 years grouping.

Two-thirds of the migrants were unmarried at the time of departure. Young men in the 'barani' areas aim to marry because starting a family allows a man to make claims on lands of his father and is also a source of capital acquisition through the socially institutionalised dowry payments. Villagers are motivated to bring in the better-off households into the expansive 'biraderi', thus strengthening its socio-economic foundation. The best, and most traditional, way of achieving this is through matrimonial alliances. Betrothal, according to the terms specified by the prospective bride's household, is also dependent upon the earning potential of the prospective groom. That migration is undertaken to enhance one's profile to establish himself in the "marriage market" is an implicit acknowledgement.

III. THE IMPACT

There are three fundamental stages which needs to be assessed [see Lipton (1982), p.191]; (i) the period of absence; (ii) the period of remittance inflow; and (iii) the period subsequent to the return to home communities/country.

The Impact of Absence

On the face of it, the migration of labour from the 'barani' areas to the Persian Gulf oil-producing region, has been a boon to the households involved. The income differentials were significant enough to draw upon a workforce *willing* to undertake migration; those who could migrate very often did. But even this long-term risk diversifying strategy did undeniably subject the households to some costs—in terms of the increased risk—for the period the members were abroad till the time the remittance flow started.

The results of the surveys show that, in general, the households coped quite effectively with the loss of labour. The slack was picked up functionally by other members of the household and/or the 'biraderi', with the majority indi-

cating minimal problems encountered income-generating activities at home, subsequent to the out-movement. There are though, some exceptions.

The Impact of Remittances

The funds sent home by the workers are the 'raison d'être' of migratory activity. The most significant aspect of this is depicted by the contribution of remittances to household income. The nominal value estimates of annually remitted capital when considered as proportion of total household income describe fantastically high levels. For 65 percent of the migrant households in the sample, the funds from abroad were found to constitute more than 75 percent of total annual income; for half of the migrant units they were over 85 percent. In fact, over the 1980–84 reference period there was only one household for whom the remittance component was less than 50 percent of total income. Thus the remittance factor brings home the attractiveness of international migration of the 'barani' area inhabitants. No comparable domestic employment could even remotely match the amounts observed for these capital inflows.

For reasons related to the socio-economic background of the migrants, it was observed that the migrant workers remitted a very significant proportion of their earnings and savings. The estimates determined suggest that these constituted, on average, 64 percent of annual earnings and 87 percent of savings respectively.

The Utilisation of Remittances

Foreign employment opportunities are linked to the expenditure and investment behaviour of households through the motivations governing their articulated strategy. Given that the household survival or self-betterment strategy is essentially fashioned by its relative socio-economic position in the village, then it may be suggested that the investments and various other expenditures are primarily directed towards satisfying the objectives and goals of such an approach. Three factors stand out which characterise the pattern of expenditure and reflect the attitude of people to their environment. These are, in order of importance: (i) the needs of the households; (ii) their aspirations; and (iii) access to investment opportunities.

In gathering information on the various uses of remittances, it was determined that many households as a first step spent substantial amounts on items of *basic need*—defined specifically to include food, clothing/footwear and related accessories and health—and also retained a significant portion of remitted funds

for contingencies. Thus for many of the sub-subsistence units, the positive impact of remittance on *basic needs* and on previously non-existing or negligible savings implies, before all else, not the potential of investment but rather the greater degree of control over their everyday life and therefore, more security. In fact the security orientation of the poorer units was noted to be such that even the most needed investments, such as housing were only forthcoming after the *basic needs*. Situation of the households had improved and a certain savings threshold had been reached.

Expenditure out of remittances describes many "rounds" which may be conceived of as explaining an established order of priorities. The logic of established priorities highlights a pattern where the money received is initially directed towards the most pressing needs and then on to lesser exigent concerns. However, the determined priorities also need to be assessed with respect to households of varying socio-economic profiles. Investments and expenditures in certain key areas are considered below.

Investment in Housing

Housing qualifies as the most important category of expenditure because many view it as the best and safest form of security. Certainly in consideration of the relatively poorer units the case is quite clear, where nearly all households prior to migration were living in 'kutcha' (mud and straw) or at best in structures which were part 'kutcha' and part 'pukka' (bricks and bonded with cement). The consequences of this are all too apparent in the vulnerability of such dwellings to the vagaries of weather. Invariably because of the threat to human life, substantial resources had to be committed each year to repair the damage inflicted by the monsoons.² In absence of remittances the amounts available are such that improvements are unlikely and allow the household to basically "patch up". Thus the need for proper housing.

Acquisition of Land

Responses in the interviewing schedule showed that the majority of the households—those owning land as well as the landless—would if given a choice

² In absence of social services and insurance against such disasters, this could be a major problem for many and very especially those who are closer to the subsistence margin. Canon, for instance, in discussing the various aspects of vulnerability of such rural folk talks of the "...burden on limited finances..." and points out that the "...cost may not be in terms of cash outlay, but instead the loss of time which would otherwise be used livelihood/earning activities" [Canon (1990), p. 11].

prefer to augment their profile through the purchase of land whose acquisition is still, within the "norms" and "values" of these societies, the surest way to respectability. However, the circumstances defined by the prevailing agrarian structure, which suggests a low degree of access to such opportunities in the 'barani' regions, often renders such investment almost impossible. The restricted access to land, particularly for cultivation, is because there is hardly any land to dispose of and further, given its socio-economic importance, people are also not willing to part with it. The situation with respect to land acquisition has been exacerbated over the last seven years by a meteoric rise in land prices evidenced in the aftermath of the remittance inflow. This has made the procurement of land, if not impossible then certainly, impractical especially for the poorer households.

Expenditure on Ceremonies

Given the limited access to such investments the channels of capital absorption, for the majority of the households, were noted to be determined by other considerations which are reflective of the social values of the societies under review. Here the importance of ceremonial obligations is fundamentally acknowledged which, normally take into account the expenditure on marriages, deaths, pilgrimage, religious/cultural feasts and, of course in the case of the Punjab, the "vartan bhanji". These expenditures were found to be heavier in the Punjab than in the NWFP, particularly so in the case of marriages which at times – in daughter's or sister's marriage – required the preparation of dowries, and the "vartan bhanji" on which the frequency of expenditure was seen to be fairly high. The Pathans, on the other hand, are renowned for their hospitality which they construe as a measure of their social standing and spend freely while entertaining guests and on religious feasts and festivals. Although such occasions are relatively fewer than those noted in the Punjabi social structures, the amounts spent can be quite high.

Acquisition of Consumer Goods

The fact that major amounts were spent on consumer durables is something that needs to be explained rather than accepted as a 'fait accompli'. Here as well a distinction needs to be made between households. The aspirations of relatively richer households are reflective of their aim of being held in esteem by

their peers and community.³ In the case of the 'barani' areas, particularly those in the Punjab, the attractiveness of migration has, to a great extent, been conditioned by commercial networks endorsed by state directives—especially in the context of a country pursuing export-led strategy—of a liberal import policy, which describes a consumption pattern constituted mainly of luxury items. Those who cannot acquire these consider themselves inferior to those who can, and believe that through migration they would be able to procure such goods and therefore enhance their social and economic position/profile. It should be noted, however, that it is not just the acquisition of consumer goods but the "aping" of behaviour of a certain segment of population—in relative environments—with which one associates a higher socio-economic profile. Such behaviour is common only among the relatively richer 'biraderis' vying for the social, economic and political leadership of their respective villages.

Where the poorer (sub-subsistence) households are concerned, for a vast majority, such acquisitions suggested neither ostentatious behaviour nor wasteful expenditure. Apart from six migrant households who had indicated purchasing goods from abroad, the majority stated that the goods – such as televisions, video recorders, refrigerators, etc.—were procured not for personal use but to be sold in the local markets at a certain premium. Some did purchase various goods for their own use, but overwhelmingly these tended to be domestically manufactured/assembled; the relatively high quality goods that came from abroad were mostly disposed of in the home markets to realise some gains. There is little evidence to suggest that the poorer households consciously conceived of the consumer goods as "hedges" against inflation. It seems to be purely a one-off thing where the possibilities of gains were quite apparent. Inadvertently though the consumer goods did perform the function of "hedges" which, in the 'barani' areas, is traditionally entrusted to gold and jewellery.

Investments in Agriculture

Investment in agriculturally productive enterprises were found to be an exception rather than a rule. Where such investments occurred, it was the nature of the production process which determined the nominal amounts of expenditure. There are limits to *productive* investment especially for a sub-subsistence house-

³ It has been suggested, in the case of migration from the rural areas of developing countries, that notions of "relative deprivation" and awareness of economic conditions and opportunities to aspire to are sufficient inducements to migrate see Stark and Katz (1984).

hold trying to maximise its gains in the short period. For such units, the infeasibility of investment is clearly demonstrated in the context of small holdings where returns do not justify the heavy expenditures. Therefore, for example, in the case of heavy mechanical inputs such as tractors, threshers and tubewells, which require a considerable capital outlay, one found a minimal dispensation of funds. For the smallholders it was more worthwhile to rent in equipment or use traditional farming practices. In this regard agricultural activities were directly served through investments in the motorisation and electrification of wells and, to a much lesser extent, in the purchase of seeds and fertilisers.

The major investments in land were observed to be geared mainly towards the development of rent yielding commercial plots, rather than towards cultivation. A fair amount of prime cultivable land in both villages—particularly the tracts lying close to the major roads – had been removed from agricultural production and was now being utilised for commercial purposes. A major reason for this is the increased commercialisation of the local economy where liquidity has become an important concern in recent years. Hence, investments were undertaken in activities which had a high turnover in the immediately foreseeable future. The logic behind such investments is thus, derived from: (i) the very low profitability of agriculture in these regions;⁴ and (ii) the demonstrated feasibility of quick gains in the short period through other enterprises basically in the sphere of informal sector ventures.

Investments in Informal Sector Activities

The *productive* utilisation of remittances is discerned for informal sector activities. However, these activities are for the most aimed at retail rather than any physical value adding ventures. Though such activities do serve a purpose, their viability over the long run is questionable as they are traditionally short-term ventures largely dependent on "hot money" flows and remittances which are exogenously determined. The stimulus to the development of such activities is greatest in urban areas and/or where there is a large shadow economy in operation, as may be the case in the NWFP, implying a high velocity of money circulation and a high turnover. Once the monetary flows start drying up—as the present

⁴There are, characteristically, other concerns as well whose traits are not purely economic. An activity which does not augur well in terms of income yield is socially classified as an inferior endeavour. Holding land may have its social relevance but what one does with it is a totally different matter. Connell *et al.* (1974) had also noted in their work on migration from rural areas, that the significance of land lay purely in its income generating potential.

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situation suggests with the accelerating pace of return migration signifying a closure of employment opportunities abroad and hence, remittances – and the expenditure on consumption falls, then there is a definite threat to the survival of such activities. The situation in the ‘barani’ areas has not been helped by a saturation of business activities, most of which are set up primarily as a result of a demonstration effect. Consequently, those involved in these “ubiquitous” ventures stated that not only was there a consistent decline in the profitability level, but in recent years they had also suffered losses. The inescapable conclusion being that, such activities though assisting the households in the short period suggest not only a loss of valuable funds in the long run but in the event of foreclosures a loss of an income source as well.

The Issue of Return

The jury is still out, so to speak, on the impact of return migration as the movement is in its embryonic phase. However, from the village survey it was determined that the return of the members did in no way suggest a satisfactory conclusion to migration, either for the individuals or their households. When queried about remigration, a near unanimous response was that the sojourn had been terminated prematurely and a desire to migrate again was expressed.

IV. A CONCLUDING REMARK

The process under deliberation has implications not only for the short and medium term, but also for the long term prospects of the household and, of course, the national economy. It should be fairly clear that certain important distinctions are likely to emerge in analyzing migration over different time-spans; the long-term effects may be in discordance with what transpires in the short/medium period and the realised short-term benefits may not necessarily imply that the same holds true over the long run. Furthermore, the effects of migration are not only seen as a concern over time but also over household of varying socio-economic profiles.

It is essentially inferred from the analysis of migration from the ‘barani’ areas that the region and its inhabitants suffer from two measures of structured inequality: spatial and socio-economic. The first reflects the place of the region in the country’s development plans, which highlight the general neglect of the ‘barani’ areas. It is noted that, given the inability of the State to provide welfare services and the like, historical developments have conditioned local environments

where each has produced its own social infrastructure. These infrastructure, which provide support and protection against adversities, have emerged from a long period of interaction and evolution. The aggregate effect of such infrastructures, as Harvey has suggested, is to help consolidate a structured coherence of particular environments [Harvey (1985), p. 146]. Norms and codes of conduct are established through which the various classes promote a particular *lifestyle* of socio-economic relationships deemed to be the "optimal". This is the critical concern for *the rational action within these structures must be seen as being motivated by the need to reproduce the lifestyle* rather than a pursuit of simple material gain.

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Comments on
“International Migration and the “Moral”
Economy of the ‘Barani’ Peasantry”

As far as memory goes, people have been migrating to areas with better economic opportunities. So, whenever economic opportunities arise outside their geographic boundaries people opt for migrating to those areas with relatively high net wages and lesser restrictions.

The paper under review has tried to add another dimension to the traditional studies on labour migration, that of “social ties” which work as a ‘Push’ factor. As such this is a welcome addition to the studies on labour migration.

Studies on migration can broadly be divided into: Micro-level studies vs. Macro-level studies. At the micro level, individual or household migrant’s decisions-making behaviour is studied. Here, both ‘Pull’ and ‘Push’ factors affect the decision of a migrant. At the macro-level, migration flows are affected by the socio-economic variables of both the sending and receiving ends. The impact of migration on both the sending and receiving ends can be studied by reversing the above causality.

One can further divide studies where a migrant can be treated as: a Guest or Temporary migrant. Migration from Pakistan mostly to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa is of this type; a to-and-fro kind of migrant, where a migrant although settled outside the country makes frequent visits to his/her home country and keeps close social and economic ties with his/her home country. Pakistanis mostly settled in the countries of Europe and North America are of this kind; a permanent migrant, a very insignificant proportion of Pakistani migrants are of this kind; a migrant can be skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled; a migrant can be differentiated by his/her origin in the home country, i.e., a migrant can be from a rural area or an urban area.

The author has tried to cover in his study most of the categories, I have just classified. As such the paper under review has many dimensions. It seems, however, that due to this, the paper could not present a systematic analysis of even a single aspect of migration.

The paper is based on a survey of five ‘barani’ (rain-fed) districts in Pakistan. No description of the sampling technique used in the survey is reported in the paper. Similarly, no details of the variables used in the survey are reported. The

descriptive nature of the paper hides many statistics which can be presented to support various assertions made in the paper. The paper gives a detailed account of the structural factors which affect migration but are rarely verified empirically.

Various relationships are discussed in the paper but it is not reported which test-statistic is used to verify these relationships. The author could have utilized a multiple regression technique to test various hypotheses proposed in the paper.

It is not clear from the paper what dependent variable is being explained, as the author has simultaneously used individual migrants, migration rates, and probability of migration, etc.

The paper, while discussing migration behaviour, only discusses the 'push' factors. No mention is made of the 'pull' factors. As a result, it is difficult to assess the imbalances which the author is referring to at the beginning of the paper.

It has been argued that "unemployment rates' are surprisingly low in the 'barani' region". In contrast to this observation, Pakistan, as a whole, observed fairly high unemployment rates during the same period which are attributed among other factors mainly to the 'Discouraged Worker's Phenomena', that is when out of the labour force persons perceive rising employment opportunities within or outside their countries, they become part of the labour force. This discrepancy needs some explanation.

Despite the fact that most of the recent migration is to the countries of the Middle East, the discussion on remittances is limited only to some evidence from the United Kingdom, where most of the migrants are to-and-fro kind and have a different pattern of remitting their savings than the temporary migrants to the countries of the Middle East.

Finally, while discussing the impact of migration, nothing is said about the non-migrant family members, for instance, whether female-folk have changed their attitude towards participation in the labour force, whether earnings of non-migrants workers have changed, or whether education of the children is affected due to emigration etc.

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