Begging in Rural India and Bangladesh

This paper makes a case for seeing poor people’s experiences of begging as a living strategy propelled by poverty, economic insecurity, ill-health and ageing. Using in-depth interviews with men and women from eastern India and northern Bangladesh, it stresses the narrative accounts of the migrants, their tales of travelling to various destinations and the significance of the remittances they earned. Through these accounts, the aim is to show the resourcefulness and agency required to engage in begging. Begging may be necessary to better respond to food and cash hardships in poor landless households in rural settings. It is neither a deliberate act of avoiding work nor an institutional tradition.

An old man got on the bus from Gaibandha to Chittagong, in north-west Bangladesh. He paid his fare, but the conductor did not allow him to take a seat, so he crouched in a small space alongside the bus engine for the long overnight journey. Some passengers laughed at him. No one offered him a seat. He told us that he was on his way to beg. He had been doing this work for the last 12 years, making trips at least once a month. He said that Chittagong and Sylhet were good places to make a living because residents were generous and kind. When he got to Chittagong, he spent three hours each day begging, going house to house. On Thursdays and Fridays, he sat near the mosque all day. When he had earned a few hundred taka, he gave the money to the imam of the mosque for safe-keeping. He told us that he had to make a living from begging since his sons refused to offer support. He often experienced hostility during his onward and return journeys, as we had witnessed.

Short migration trips for begging, like the one described in the excerpt above, are common in rural West Bengal as well as in Bangladesh. They are a way of earning money relied on by rural households affected by lack of wealth, social security systems and socio-economic inequality. The people who earn their living in this way are the focus of this paper. The data on which this paper is based was collected as a part of a larger study of agricultural and non-agricultural work migrants and family members who stayed behind in migrant households. This study was conducted as part of the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty research project on “Social Protection by and for Temporary Work Migrants”, funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development.

1 Terminology

Begging is a conceptually complex and contested term. Jordon, in a review of history of begging internationally, reflects on the cultural context in developed countries. Begging was associated with alms-giving and was the dominant form of relief before the introduction of the Poor Law in countries such as England, (Jordon 1999: 43). With the advent of the Poor Law came the concept of the “undeserving” poor. Vagrants and beggars numbered among them (Vorspan 1977; Slack 1995). This perception continues to permeate views on people who beg, perhaps because begging is identified with the attributes of criminality, and beggars are perceived to be threatening (Ramanathan 2008: 35).

The view that begging is associated with undesirable behaviour is found in many parts of the world. In a south-eastern Mexican city, for example, begging was characterised as “deviant behaviour” and an action of last resort (Fabrega 1971). It implied an identity lacking self-regard and self-respect, relegating an individual to a degraded social position.

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64
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The paper is organised as follows. The next section is a brief account of the research settings, introducing the study sites where this research was conducted. The main body of the paper is the synthesis and interpretation of the migrant narratives, including their descriptions of the journeys and their experiences.
at the destinations. In these two sections, we discuss the accounts of migrants, making comparisons between the experiences and causes of migration by men and women. We also highlight the coping mechanisms of family members who stay behind in households where others (mainly husbands) migrate. This is followed by a discussion and analysis of our findings in relation to the existing literature.

2 Research Setting

In 2005, a team of researchers conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork as a part of the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty at the University of Sussex, on a project on “Social Protection by and for Temporary Work Migrants”. The research focused on a cross-country comparison of two Bengali-speaking temporary work migrant communities and their families at study sites in Murshidabad district, West Bengal and Gaibandha district, Bangladesh. Both the study sites were sending communities of migrants and had broadly similar cultural and agro-ecological systems. The research explored the effects of the absence of the migrant on the household members who stayed behind. It also studied the risks and coping mechanisms used by migrants during their journeys and at the workplaces.

In addition, the various forms of social protection were also investigated. These included formal agencies such as the state, non-governmental organisations and political parties, and informal kin and other social resources that provided support to the migrants and those staying behind. The main research methods for data collection were participant observation and in-depth interviews. A team of three people in Bangladesh and another two researchers in India stayed at the respective study sites, building familiarity, observing, and interacting closely with the research participants.

The setting for the study in Bangladesh was Badalpara village in Gaibandha district. Out of the three wards in the village, the study was conducted in ward seven. The village was along the Tista river in the east and north, the Sundarganj upazilla on the south and the Chachya Mirganj bazaar in the west (Kabir et al 2008: 23). There were 444 households in 2005, with a Muslim majority and Hindu minority; both communities lived together in peace with no separate paras (hamlet). Most of the people were poor, with the poorest settled on the embankment. In conducting the census, the Bangladesh research team found that a significant number of people were landless (32%) while some did not have homestead plots to build a house. The majority of landowners possessed their own plots in the char, or sandy land, near the river, for cultivation of groundnuts, usually after the annual flooding.

Agriculture was the main occupation of the people in Badalpara. Low land productivity compelled landowners to work as agricultural wage labourers to manage food throughout the year. There was a concentration of small businessmen, carpenters, rickshaw-pullers and masons (Kabir et al 2008: 26). River erosion affected the majority of villagers as the land for cultivation bordered the river. Those with homestead land in the village and cultivable lands in the char cultivated cash crops like jute or groundnuts; leasing or cultivation of these crops through sharecropping was also common.

In West Bengal, research was conducted in Jalpara village in Murshidabad district. Rogaly and Rafique’s prior experience of researching migrant men in the same study locality helped to follow the ways in which structural factors, such as wealth, age, gender and class, influenced patterns of migration, including decisions on who should go and who stay put (Rogaly 2003; Rafique and Rogaly 2005). In 2005, the revisit helped to build on an earlier study of women’s experiences in staying behind. It also obtained fresh field evidence on migration patterns, including additional in-depth interviews with men and women.

Jalpara is five kilometres from the nearest urban centre, Toperdanga. It is relatively newly settled. Interviews with key informants revealed that there was a large village here in the past, almost all of which had been deserted, partly due to some communicable disease and partly due to vandalism (Rafique and Rogaly 2005). The new settlement began after the establishment of a cluster of houses, called “Colony-para” from government funding after the Left Front came to power in the state in 1977. Following the establishment of Colony-para many people from the neighbouring villages moved to Jalpara. Most of the incoming families had very little or no land; only a very few had some cultivable land.

In 2005, Jalpara had 328 households out of which 10% belonged to the Hindus and the rest were Muslims. The economy of the village was based mainly on agriculture. Some villagers combined non-agricultural livelihoods with agriculture. Such small businesses included grocery shops, tea-stalls, traders in seasonal products and fish. Since most residents either had very small amounts of land or were landless, hiring out their labour was the main livelihood.

The division of labour in the village was gendered, with the traditional ideology that women should take charge of domestic activities, confining themselves within the household, and men should be the breadwinners. The local employment market could not provide adequate work to everyone in the community to run households and satisfy basic needs round the year. Therefore, members from almost 70% of households were engaged in out-migration. Begging was one such means of earning. There were a significant number of beggars in Jalpara, concentrated in Colony-para. Mostly Muslims, they included men and women.

3 Patterns of Migration from the Study Sites

Short and temporary internal work migration by men and women from both the study sites necessitated going away from home, either within the same district or in nearby towns or cities. Obtaining timely and lump sum cash amounts, much higher than daily earnings locally, was one of the key factors for outmigration from both the sites.

In Badalpara village, the four crucial reasons for migration were: (1) to meet daily household expenses and educational costs, (2) to make more substantial purchases, for instance, of land for economic improvement, (3) to recover losses from crop damage from natural calamities, and (4) migration by young people to visit new places and earn cash. Nearly 65% of the poor and 16%
of those in the “middle class” were migrants. The extremely poor did not migrate owing to their lack of means. Travel expenses and worries of leaving the family at home were other deterrents dampening migration. While women migrated from a few households, the majority of the migrants were men aged between 20 and 40 years.

Men migrated mainly for three types of work – rickshaw-pulling, agricultural work and carpentry. The work destinations were influenced by the migrant’s work. For instance, Salim, a rickshaw-puller and an agricultural work migrant had been travelling to Dhaka, Feni, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Sylhet, primarily urban locations for nine years. Yosef, a 28-year old agricultural work migrant with no land, migrated to Dhaka, Bogra, Feni and Comilla. This was rural-rural migration to other districts. A third migrant, Israil, a carpenter, went to Dinajpur, Bogra and Dhaka when he was contacted by employers on his mobile phone. The destinations for carpenters were cities or small towns having furniture shops.

A few women migrated from Badalpara, due to poverty resulting from separation from husbands or due to widowhood. For instance, Alima, who after suffering abuse from her co-wife separated from her husband and went to her natal home in Sundarganj, started to work as a housemaid. Since the income was not enough, Alima and her daughter then started to migrate to Feni. Some women had over 15 years of migration experience, often staying in Chittagong for six months at a stretch as maidservants.

At the second study site, in Murshidabad district in West Bengal, outmigration was due to the unequal spread of irrigation (Rogaly 1997), as well as the high density of population and landlessness and small size of landholdings (Rafique and Rogaly 2005). The devastation caused by the millennium flood of 2000 became an additional cause for outmigration. Rafique (2003: 944), who surveyed Jalpara after the flood, found that there were “major losses for landholders but it hit the landless even harder”. While the wealthy who lived in brick-built houses managed to do their cooking with ease and stored their foodgrains and other belongings easily, the poor landless households on lowland had their mud-houses and possessions washed away. Fresh migration from 31 households was reported in the aftermath of this flood (Rafique and Rogaly 2005: 365).

The landowning status of households significantly influenced decisions to migrate. Due to the prevailing land and other asset inequality in Jalpara, temporary work migration was a crucial means of livelihood for those with little or no land (Rogaly and Rafique 2003: 663). In 2000, while a small percentage owned over 13 acres (5.2 hectares) of land, the majority of individuals were landless or owned/leased very small plots of less than half an acre. Men from landless households constituted 56% of those who were making two to three migration trips for agricultural work, while a further 17% had only a little land (Rafique and Rogaly 2005: 365). Migration surveys conducted in 2005 showed that agricultural and non-agricultural work migration was common; each of the migration trips had specific destinations, durations and seasons.

Seasons influenced migration for agricultural work, especially paddy. Migration for boro, or summer rice, transplantation occurred in mid-January and for the harvest in mid-April; the duration for both was up to a month. Birbhum, Bardhaman and Hooghly districts were the main work destinations. Recently reports came of migration by women for potato harvesting to Bardhaman and Hooghly districts. These women stayed away from their homes during February for two to three weeks. For jute-washing, men migrated to Nadia in September.

Agricultural work migration was rural to rural. Migration for non-agricultural work, including brick kiln work, earth digging, underground cable laying and construction work, involved either rural-urban or rural-rural migration to the outskirts of towns in the districts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Bardhaman. Migration for most of this work occurred year-round, with an increase in mobility during the dry months of November to June.

In both sites, begging was a key source of livelihood for several migrants, often continuing throughout the year. Those involved in this occupation mostly visited destinations within Murshidabad, but during festivals and fasting periods, they often went further into the state of Jharkhand. Those from Badalpara visited nearby towns, but some, like the old man described in our opening paragraph, travelled to major towns like Chittagong and Dhaka. A detailed discussion of migration for begging from both the study sites now follows.

4 Men’s and Women’s Accounts of Begging

Our June 2005 census in Jalpara revealed that in eight households, men were migrating for begging; there were 16 women migrants. Some of these migrants had reservations about this work. They, however, realised that begging was essential to make a living. For example, Samsed, who was 45 and a father of three children, said:

There is no respect in doing this [begging] work. Working as agricultural labour is better. They [agricultural workers] have more respect as they rely on selling labour. Earning by keeping my hands folded in front of others – sometimes I feel embarrassed but what to do. Feeding the family is essential. The demands of the family are high. Food is required. If there is no food, then the frequency of quarrels between us [husband and wife] increases.

In some households, poverty was not the only driving factor behind begging. Ageing and a decrease in physical fitness for agricultural work often compelled men in the age group of 50 to 60 to start begging. Additionally, the long suffering from various diseases often associated with hard labour and lack of enough food persuaded men to engage in the comparatively less arduous work of begging. The account of 65 years old Ajad, from his in-depth interview, illustrates this:

Since the last 15 or 16 years, I haven’t been able to do any hard laborious work. I am suffering from gastric problems, chest pains and my waist is always aching. Therefore begging is most appropriate keeping in mind my physical stamina. I have a family of three children and a wife to feed.

Samsed and Ajad’s accounts of migration are not unusual. In fact, in some households, older men as fathers continued to beg so as to remain independent from their sons’ earnings and fulfil their own personal financial needs, as Ajad reiterated:
I tried to work in the locality for a few days. But I failed to continue and thus had to depend on my son's earnings. Later on, someone took me for begging to a village and I started doing that. [Now] I do not take their [sons'] money. He keeps it with his wife...I do not give him my earnings. Actually I do not earn much. Whatever I earn goes to meet my personal expenses. Sometimes I get some vegetables, oil and so on for the household.

In yet other households with several male members, both adults and adolescents engaged in a combination of income-earning activities. For instance, sons migrated for agricultural work or trade in seasonal products in and around the locality, and fathers migrated for begging. Tarjen Sheikh, 55 years old, had been begging since 2001, because of his inability to migrate for paddy work anymore. In an informal chat, he said that his four sons were also earning members of the household; they sold peanuts and picked green chilly on daily wages. Tarjen mentioned that since his family size was large – with three dependent members, including his abandoned daughter and her child, and an unmarried adolescent daughter – earning by most of the family members, including his wife, was essential.

In Bangladesh, the situation was not dissimilar. Men migrated for begging primarily to meet the food needs of the household. Additionally, some migrant families were severely disadvantaged by poverty. Among the worst off was Ramjan, who had been begging since birth to make a living. However, with time, his family prospects began to improve because he had sons who engaged in other work and took responsibility for their parents (Kabir et al 2008: 32).

In both the study sites, although the majority of the residents were either landless or had very small landholdings, only a small fraction undertook begging as a source of earning. In these families, poverty was combined with other factors such as a sudden economic crisis, the age and health condition of the breadwinner, social conditions, and whether the structure of the family was nuclear or joint. For instance, in Jalpara, abandoned or divorced women as well as widows who engaged in a combination of income-earning activities. For instance, sons migrated for agricultural work during specific seasons, once or twice a year. However, this situation often involved irregularity of remittances, ill-health for the migrants and hardships due to climatic conditions. Manwara's description further illustrates some of these dynamics.

I can't migrate during the monsoons. The house remains nearly submerged for a week and the roads are waterlogged. It is also difficult to go when I have knee pain. I can't walk two miles to the train station. Usually I manage to collect enough foodgrains to be used when I can't migrate. If the food stocks completely finish, then I borrow from my married daughter who lives next door. Sometimes I manage to bring old broken toys for my grandchildren.

I have to go [migrate] to fill my stomach. I hoped to rest as an old woman with my four sons caring for me, but they have told me they are too poor to support me. Actually, being a widow is an advantage for this type of work [begging]. People have pity on your status and poor condition and give you at least something. Since I have been begging for over 10 years now, I know specific areas from where I am assured alms. When my husband was alive, I used to stay at home and take care of the children while my lame husband went out to beg.

Within Jalpara, poor widows confined their interactions to neighbouring friends and their sons' households. They mentioned that begging as well as their poor and widowed status made the local residents indifferent towards their needs. Nevertheless, they felt that they were better off than married women because of their freedom to talk openly to all men, women and children in the community and visit public places at their own discretion. This gave them social and economic autonomy.

While accepting that begging is essential for these women to make a living, it must be noted that the situation is dynamic and changing. In the Bangladesh site, Kabir et al (2008: 53) mention two women in their sample who were migrating to Feni for domestic work. They needed to spend enough time in Feni every year to get adequate work to support their families. Neither of the two women had a full-time job in Feni. They did domestic work in a number of households and were further obliged to supplement their maidservant salaries with begging, to obtain food and some savings. For Alima, a 25-year old woman, begging on Fridays and at festivals provided a temporary respite from the strenuous nature of the domestic work, which often involved lifting heavy objects. Moreover, she managed to get 25-30 taka per
day and some rice; sometimes she got old clothes which she either gave to her family or sold for cash (Kabir et al 2008: 56). In another case, Liki sustained her family in all their needs through migration. During her six months migratory work as a maidservant, she managed to earn 2,000 taka and further supplemented the income by seeking alms (Kabir et al 2008: 57). In addition, and unlike in West Bengal, Liki now and then migrated with her elderly and disabled husband, begging door to door and managing to earn 20 to 30 taka.

There was more to this type of migration, in particular the migrants’ experiences of travelling to and staying at the destinations.

5 Migration Journey and Experiences at the Destinations

In Bangladesh, agricultural work migrants and rickshaw-pullers travelled in the daytime or in night buses to their respective destinations, often paying for the valid ticket. Nevertheless, some extremely poor people, especially those migrating for begging, travelled on the roof of the bus, whenever possible. For example, Ramjan went to Dinajpur, Rangpur and Bonarpura to beg, and usually travelled on the roof of the bus, despite a previous experience of sustaining cuts on his face from a low-hanging bamboo tree. He said he preferred to travel that way because the fare to Dinajpur on the roof was 20 to 25 taka compared to 35 taka for travelling inside the bus (Kabir et al 2008: 40). Once he arrived at the destination, Ramjan, like other work migrants, tried to find sources of support, people known to him and those he could trust (Kabir et al 2008: 43). Staying for 20 days to a month at the destination, he earned 15–20 seer of rice, money and some old clothes.\(^4\)

In 2005, he returned after 10 days with 150 taka and some clothes which he sold in Mirganj market for an additional 150 taka. Ramjan was once given clothes that could be sold for 20 taka, with which he bought one kilogram rice (Kabir et al 2008: 56).

In Jalpara, men often migrated individually in trains, without paying any fare, to reach the destination. They stayed at the destination for about one to two weeks. Sometimes they formed a small group, joining other beggars they had met during the journey. There was also evidence, as this section discusses, of groups formed with women from Jalpara. At the destination, they sought rice and money, visiting door to door or sitting outside the mosque after the Friday prayers. In addition, they also asked for cooked food for consumption while they were away from home. Sometimes, particularly in the month of Ramadan, they begged for old clothes.

The amount of cash they earned varied, depending primarily on the duration of stay at the destination, the season when they migrated and the number of households they visited. As Ajad believed, one could earn up to 80 kilograms of rice and Rs 100 to 150 in cash in 10–12 days. This amount according to him was quite substantial.

Long distance journeys were made in the train – often without buying the ticket – or in state buses. Sometimes rice was brought back home. However, it was often sold at the local market, due to physical infirmities, which made long distance carrying difficult, and to obtain cash which could be brought home. On staying arrangements and living conditions at the destination, the men reported that it was fairly easy to find a place. Clubhouses, school buildings, privately owned accommodation with a family or outside a house were used to spend a week or more. In some cases, men developed familiarity with the landlords, which further helped them find cultivable land under the tenancy of fixed produce share. However, often the destinations did not have many facilities. For instance, Ajad was afraid of migrating because there were few bushes or facilities for defecation.

In Jalpara, women organised migrant groups systematically and arranged travelling and living conditions well in advance through mutual discussions with fellow migrants. They migrated in groups of three to four along with similar groups of men. Usually before migrating, they planned their journey considering the destination to be visited, their need for cash, food or clothes as well as the possibility of an upcoming festival or social event. At the destination, they would split and go from house to house in groups of two or three. They carried their own bags, a pair of clothes and some money, if it was available. While the women who migrated were independent, migrant men had to leave their wives and often dependent children at home where they experienced various hardships.

6 Changing Division of Labour in the Absence of Men

How did family members who stayed behind, women and children, manage their living in the absence of migrant men? We repeatedly heard women mention food deficits and economic hardships. We asked them to describe these. These deficits and hardships corresponded to the inability of migrant men to obtain cash remittances every time they returned from their migration trips. For instance, in Jalpara, Aleka Bibi, a 55-year-old woman was embarrassed to describe her husband’s work:

He (husband) migrates nearly every month. You know he does that (begging) work. He does not return with cash every time. My daughter is lying sick on the floor for three weeks but there is no money. We, at home, have to find the means of income.

Uncertainty of cash remittances often made the family members who stayed behind hard up. In such circumstances they frequently sought other means of income to manage availability of food and to respond to any medical expenses incurred due to an illness (Massey 2009a). As Aleka Bibi explained,

Babu, my older son, sells peanuts at social gatherings. He brings 10 kilograms of peanuts at home, and then I or my younger sons roast the peanuts with salt on hot sand. Afterwards, he sells 50 to 60 packets of peanuts at each event. From each 10 kilograms of peanuts, he makes a profit of Rs 120. We do this work round the year even if he (husband) is at home. I usually roast the peanuts while my two younger sons, 14 and 12, put them into packets.

Although in this case peanut work was done regardless of the husband’s presence or absence, the reason for doing it was insufficient income from the husband’s migration, in this case from begging, which brought goods but not often cash. Moreover, it was the large household size, and more significantly its composition, that enabled most family members to participate actively (Massey 2009b).

In Badalpara, a migrant’s eldest son began work as a carpenter and took the responsibility for providing money for food
necessities while his father was away begging (Kabir et al 2008: 67). The son also sold old clothes brought back by his father from begging. Migration by men in such households further contributed to the vulnerabilities of those who stayed behind, in managing illness, repayment of loans and food and cash insufficiency (Seeley et al 2009).

7 Discussion and Analysis of Begging

In examining migration for begging, we have assessed the dynamics of this work as a livelihood strategy. A comparative regional perspective further enhanced our analysis of begging, recognising the various ways in which it is experienced by men and women across two study sites. According to the Criminal Revision Petition No 784 of 2006, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, groups together all the reasons for begging into laziness or alcoholism/drug addiction, or exploitation by a gang, or starvation or homelessness. Our study has shown other reasons for begging, with decisions to migrate to beg being influenced by ageing, (ill) health, food shortages, the ratio of workers to dependents and marital status. Both men’s and women’s accounts suggest that necessity tends to intervene in migrant’s decisions to beg. Men pointed to the limited availability of food as a significant challenge; women interviewees showed concern for their widowed status and their poverty.

Further, men’s accounts in particular suggested that ageing and begging are closely interlinked. In West Bengal, levels of involvement with migration changed often due to ageing and declining physical endurance. Those who were actively migrating for laborious manual work were constrained to start begging. Such decisions were further advanced because ageing population in poor rural communities had limited or no access to national social security systems such as pensions, social benefits or health care services. This state of affairs contrasts with the current discourse on ageing primarily in developed countries where longevity and ageing is raising questions of access to social security, shrinking workforce and growing recognition of need for further immigration of younger people.

Women interviewees were more elaborate in their descriptions of begging. In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, widows without any support from sons, and those who were landless, were compelled to migrate for this work. Their narratives indicated the changing perspective of women associated with begging. They pointed to the significance of such migration as a strategy to secure livelihoods. Our findings further add to the understanding of the autonomous status, enduring livelihoods and expanded activity spaces of widows.

In contrast to the work of Bamiisyie (1974) and Swanson (2005), who focused on the disabled and children, our findings draw parallels with recent research in Britain which describes women’s experiences of “visible” homelessness in Bristol. These women, who often engage in begging, spend most of their time living on the streets, in forests, night shelters or day centres (May et al 2007). These women gave detailed account of their experiences of visible homelessness as a result of family disputes, domestic violence or breakdown of family life. Begging enabled them to cope with their basic necessities.

Similarly in our study sites, women shared examples of their ability to manage a living almost throughout the year thanks to begging. Nevertheless, the accounts also suggest the seasonality of this work. Remittances of cash and food commodities increase during festivals or in the harvesting period, and monsoons hamper migration trips. The experiences of women who stayed behind captured the conflicting feelings they had over the nature of their husbands’ migration. In both study sites, women mentioned that their ability to respond to cash necessities declined due to changes in the work for which their husbands migrated – from agricultural work to begging, which did not bring cash. Nevertheless, in West Bengal in particular, regardless of their economic insecurities, these comparatively older women were better placed in their households compared to young wives due to their position in the life course and their households’ compositions. They had greater accessibility and choice to venture outside their homes, visit friends and doctors outside the locality and allocate tasks to other members in the household. Their physical insecurity also declined. They mentioned becoming accustomed to their husband’s migration and absence from home nearly every month.

Additionally, a detailed analysis of migration for begging in this paper revealed the various kinds of remittances obtained; this point recurred in many of the women’s narratives, implying a critique of how remittances should not always be conceptualised as those involving international money transfers or foreign currency or even cash (Gulati 1987; Hadi 2001). Both men and women benefited from obtaining vital necessities such as old clothes, wheat, flour, rice, garlic, onions and raw meat from benefactors. Despite the existence of two government schemes, the Public Distribution System and the Mid-day Meals Scheme, which have the “potential of contributing to the protection of households staying behind from the risk of hunger”, these were inadequately organised or operated in the West Bengal study site (Rogaly et al 2009: 96). Ultimately, in such circumstances, begging was an important and remunerative way to fulfil basic necessities.

8 Conclusion

For poor people in West Bengal and Bangladesh, begging may be an essential living strategy for survival. The description of this type of migration as a livelihood strategy explains the problems and opportunities faced by the migrants (who beg) and the lack of institutional arrangements to support people in rural communities. It illustrates people’s efforts and their struggles to make a living with limited social, economic and institutional support (Ellis and Freeman 2005: 5). Both men and women feel the strains of begging as a livelihood, a strain aggravated by ageing, declining physical stamina as well as persistent economic hardships. Yet despite the strain and despite the lack of assured cash remittances from every migration trip, most of those engaged in the activity do not believe that begging is less rewarding economically. They perceive the strengths and opportunities available from this livelihood strategy. Regardless of the beliefs attached to the work or to the people who engage
in it, remittances from begging do form an essential requisite for sustenance. They are an important asset to overcome hunger and food deficits.

This paper has demonstrated that far more important than becoming a beggar are the circumstances behind this work, the type of people involved and the nature of the activities. Since begging is not the real cause of the problem faced by poor aged people, discouraging begging would not help. Indeed, less migration for begging may only make matters worse, since for many aged men and women, migration is vital to sustaining basic needs in food and healthcare. Thus, the inclusion of migration for begging within studies on temporary internal migration would begin to address this need among poor landless households in rural communities in India and Bangladesh.

NOTES
1 Based on observations by the research team on 20 April 2005.
2 All place names are pseudonyms.
3 There were no international migrants from either of the study sites.
4 A seer is a traditional weight unit in India and south Asia. The seer equals 1/40 maund and varies from one area to another. The official size in British India was 2.057 pounds or 0.9331 kilograms.
5 In contrast, Vera-Sanso (2007: 229) highlighted how wealth differentials between households in Tamil Nadu, enabled older men and women to survive by begging; their sons no more felt obliged to support the poor parents (Vera-Sanso 2007: 229).
6 Two other studies by Rigg (2007) in Lao, Thailand, and Breman and Wiradi (2002) in Java identified similar processes of change. Migration by women can begin because of economic hard-ships, but the experience of migration may then encourage the migrant to challenge village and household norms and to negotiate a new status (Rigg 2007: 171).
7 This is in contrast with some gender and development literature which identifies the status of widows as poor, socially isolated and deprived of family care. In Bangladesh, economic pressure and landlessness in poor households leaves widows without family support (Paul 1992). In a north Indian village, Das Gupta (1995: 489) noted that if widows were not supported by their sons, they became increasingly susceptible to ill-health and increased mortality.

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