

A Thousand and One Days:
Stories of Hardship from South Asian
Migrant Workers in Singapore

Volume 2

Edited by
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For the men whose lives are changed forever because of Singapore.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary

Allamah — An honorary title carried by the highest scholars of Islamic thought, jurisprudence, and philosophy, also used as an honorific in Islam.

Apu — Literally sister in Bengali.

Azān — The Islamic call to prayer.

Bhai — Literally brother in Bengali; men commonly attach this tag to the names of their friends and compatriots, or use it without the name.

Bigha — A measure of land in Bengali, about one-third of an acre.

Chop/ Taking the Chop — Attending at MOM periodically to have a Special Pass extended (usually required every two to four weeks).

Eid — A Muslim holiday.

Gangsters — The term workers use to describe men who work for repatriation companies because of their gangster-like tactics of detaining without notice and confining workers in order to prevent them from lodging a complaint and to ensure their repatriation.

High Comm — Informal term used to describe the Bangladeshi High Commission in Singapore.

In-Principle Approval (IPA) — The document issued to migrant workers by Singapore's Ministry of Manpower before their departure from their home country. This paper shows the company name, the basic monthly salary, deductions and allowances, and indicates that the application to hire the worker has been approved.

Labour Court — A government body within Singapore's Ministry of Manpower that deals with employer-employee disputes that cannot be resolved through mediation.

Labour Exploitation — There is no agreed international definition of this term, but broadly, it describes a practice of making intensive use of the labour of individuals, generally under some form of debt or duress, for minimal recompense and under harsh conditions.

Labour Trafficking — This is the movement of persons from their normal place of residence, into a location where they face labour exploitation, through the use of deception and/or coercion.

Main Con — Main contractor; the company that holds the contract for all or a large portion of a construction project.

Medical Certificate (MC) — Document issued by doctors to authorize time off from work for ill or injured workers. The employer is only obliged to report work accidents to MOM if the MC is more than

three days. This has led to some company doctors issuing ‘short MCs’, which are inadequate for the injured worker’s recovery, but spares the employer’s safety record.

Ozū — The [Islamic](#) procedure for washing parts of the body using water, typically in preparation for formal prayers.

Points — The degree of permanent incapacity based on the doctor’s assessment of the worker’s injury, which is used to compute the insurance compensation for the worker. This is expressed as a percentage, or points. For example, the loss of vision in one eye would result in 50 per cent permanent incapacity. 50 per cent [x] the Average Monthly Earnings [x] a multiplying factor between 116 and 181 depending on age = the compensation amount. A 30-year old man earning SGD1000 assessed at 50 per cent incapacity would receive work injury compensation of SGD82,000.

Quota — The number of foreign workers, determined by MOM, that a company can legally employ in Singapore.

Repatriation Company — A company paid by employers to manage the repatriation of their workers, often using forceful and violent means. (See ‘Gangsters’ above)

Sub-Con — Subcontractors; companies contracted to work on a particular project under the main contractor.

Sunnah — The verbally-transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Islamic prophet [Muhammad](#).

Supply Company — A company that supplies labourers on a short-term basis to another company that cannot meet the labour requirements of a job. Men working for supply companies are often given longer hours and more difficult jobs because the company that hires them for temporary work is not responsible for their long-term maintenance or health. When a supply worker is injured, disagreements may result over responsibility for medical treatment and compensation. The term is not officially used by Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower, which classifies them as subcontractors, but workers readily understand the term to mean a company without its own contracts.

Temporary Job Scheme (TJS) — The Temporary Job Scheme allows workers awaiting case settlement to work for employers other than those named on their original work permits for six months. Workers required to remain in Singapore as prosecuting witnesses for the MOM are eligible for TJS.

Prayer Times (in Bengali)

Fajr (pre-dawn): This prayer is performed before sunrise.

Dhuhr (noon): After the day’s work has begun.

‘Asr (afternoon): In the late afternoon.

Maghrib (sunset): Just after the sun goes down.

‘Isha (evening): Before retiring for the night.

List of Acronyms

BDT — Bangladesh Taka (unit of currency). As of July 2015, BDT1,000 = SGD17.65

BMET — Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (Bangladesh)

HDB — Housing Development Board (HDB blocks are public housing flats in Singapore)

HSC — Higher School Certificate (equivalent of 12 years of formal schooling in Bangladesh and India)

IPA — In-Principle Approval

MC — Medical Certificate

MOM — Ministry of Manpower (Singapore)

RMG — Ready-made Garments

SGD — Singapore Dollar (unit of currency)

SSC — Secondary School Certificate (equivalent of 10 years of formal schooling in Bangladesh and India)

TCRP — The Cuff Road Project

TJS — Temporary Job Scheme

TWC2 — Transient Workers Count Too

WICA — Work Injury Compensation Act

Introduction

Sallie Yea

When men from Bangladesh and India come to work in Singapore's landscaping, cleaning, shipyard or construction sectors for the first time, they arrive with much hope and the expectations of families and communities on their shoulders. Houses will be built, school fees for siblings and their own children paid, dowries and marriages for sisters arranged, medical treatment for aged parents assured and, most importantly, money to start a small business back home saved. A common refrain heard from men is that Singapore is a land where dreams are to be made, what men sometimes call in English, 'Singapore dreaming'. Families, too, embrace this imaginary of wealth, so much so that many men say they feel immense pressure to migrate to Singapore for work. To be seen as not interested in such a migration project increasingly means facing gossip and ridicule as a lazy man, one who is uninterested in raising up either himself or his family. This is bolstered by the remittances of a few successful men, whose gain is concretized in new houses or extensions on existing dwellings for all in the village to see and admire. Moreover, unlike the Middle East and Europe, where migration is increasingly associated with high risk and poor governance and law, Singapore is perceived by men and their communities as a place where there are 'good laws' and, as such, where the 'rule of law' provides important safeguards against exploitation and injury.

But crippling debts incurred to pay for migration costs, including kickbacks and illegal fees paid to intermediaries in both home countries and in Singapore, ensure that first-timers' aspirations and dreams take a long time, sometimes years and several rounds of repeat migration, before they can be achieved. Increasingly, we see men who have paid upwards of SGD14,000 in fees to brokers. If, as commonly occurs, men's salaries are less than what they agreed to before leaving home, these fees may take four or five years to pay off. In fact, the norm, as we've found over the past five years of working with migrant workmen in Singapore, is for labour migration to have, at best, a negligible and, at worst, a negative effect on the men's financial security and socio-economic mobility back home. In part, this is due to the failure of Singapore's 'good laws' to actually result in the realization of economic and legal justice for men who are exploited. This results in, and from, what I am prone to call 'banal exploitation', that is, exploitation that is rendered so routinized as to be unremarkable and unexceptional. Banal exploitation is, I argue, the principle characteristic of men's labour sojourns in Singapore and is epitomized at its clearest by the Special Pass.

The men whose narratives appear in this edited volume can be counted amongst the ranks of those whose migration to Singapore has resulted in no significant improvement in their economic situations, status or opportunities in the short or medium terms during which we have known them. At best, some of the men we know have been lucky to pay off their migration debts, with nothing to confirm to their families and communities — or to themselves — that Singapore is indeed a 'land of dreams' for migrant workers. For others, particularly those who sustain serious injury as a result of their work in Singapore, their return home may have ramifications more far-reaching than just financial loss, as they struggle with the longer-term ill-effects of debilitating injury and pain. For all these men, the material losses associated with their failed migration in Singapore should be understood as one element in a broader malaise which, at worst, can be experienced as stigma, depression and a deep cynicism towards the world.

This book is an attempt to make visible some of these largely unseen and unheard experiences of failed labour migrants in Singapore. It is the second volume of *A Thousand and One Days*, the main outcome of the Diaries Project initiated and developed by myself (Sallie) whilst I conducted research with South Asian migrant workers in Singapore from 2011–2015. The project began in 2011 as an attempt to draw on the self-authored narratives of workers who had landed in trouble during their sojourns in Singapore. All of these men were eventually placed on a Special Pass, a visa category conferred to

migrant workers who have fallen out of work, usually either because of disputes with employers in the context of worker injury or salary and other labour disputes. A smaller number of men are placed on a Special Pass because of immigration offences that are being investigated. We discuss the violence of the Special Pass in detail in the Introduction to the first diaries volume. The Special Pass visa is a highly restrictive one under which holders are unable to work legally (having forfeited this right when they deserted their workplaces), but with limited or no social and economic protections in the form of basic needs provided by the Singapore state (such as accommodation and food). In this volume, we reiterate our belief that the violence of the Special Pass emerges from the profoundly paradoxical situation of men being unable to earn money, but with the ever present need to eat, have a place to sleep, remit money home and repay debts.

There are three purposes behind the project: The most important, as far as the editors are concerned, is to provide men with an outlet to articulate their own concerns, frustrations, and feelings in ways that are not pre-determined by our own interpretations of their problems. Second, we hope that, in the absence of the legal right to collective bargaining and organizing in Singapore, these stories in some small way help men put forward the complex and often emotive aspects of their grievances to a wider audience in Singapore. Month after month, day after day, we hear the mundane refrain from men that their efforts to seek redress in Singapore through sanctioned means of government mediation have failed to deliver justice and, more significantly, strain their familial bonds and friendship networks enormously. Finally, we wish to draw on this and the previous volume of the Diaries Project as the key medium through which awareness-raising talks can be conducted in Bangladesh to help intending migrants to Singapore understand the context they are entering and help them avoid trouble through providing tips on safe migration and information to help make their migration less uncertain.

The chapters in this volume are written in two ways. The first is a narrative recollection of the circumstances of migration and work in Singapore, circumstances that ultimately lead to men being placed on a Special Pass. The second is daily diary entries written by men whilst on a Special Pass in Singapore. It was left to the men to choose how and what they wished to write; to impose boundaries on this process would have compromised the key goal of enabling men to record their Special Pass lives in their own ways and according to their own frames of reference. Over forty diaries were passed to us, and it was difficult to exclude so many provocative and powerful narratives from the final publication. The entries we chose to include here each illustrate a particular issue that we believe adds insight into the key problems the men face, including two chapters written by men about their experiences after they returned home to Bangladesh. It is hoped that through the Diaries Project, Singaporeans, communities and families in home countries, and intending migrants themselves begin to appreciate and actively respond to the tragedy of banal exploitation that has come to define the lives of so many of the men we've come to know.

Chapter One

Rahizul

Rahizul migrated to Singapore for the first time in 2010. After working for the same company for four years he was injured at work when a pipe slammed into his head. Although he has recovered from his injury, his front teeth were knocked out. Because the injury was not deemed by MOM to be 'urgently and medically necessary' his company was not liable to pay for repairs to his teeth. The NGOs TWC2 and HealthServe cooperated to provide Rahizul with false teeth at no cost. When Rahizul left his company because of his injury case, he also filed a salary case because of illegal deductions his company had been making from his salary since he had first started working for them. He was adamant that the final settlement with his employer was around SGD3,500 short of what he was actually owed. However, the boss bribed some other workers from the company to state that the company did not make any illegal deductions from their salary, thus diminishing Rahizul's claims. Rahizul attempted to recoup the SGD 3500 through private mediation with the assistance of an NGO, but the boss of his company held firm, stating that MOM had already approved the final settlement. At the time of publication, Rahizul remains in Singapore on the TJS, attempting to make up for the money he lost through illegal salary deductions.

Whilst on a Special Pass both Rahizul's grandparents passed away. Although his financial loss was a problem, Rahizul's biggest lament was being unable to return home to be with his mother during this difficult time in their family. For eleven months no MOM officer contacted Rahizul to update him about his case. It was during this time that the deaths in his family occurred.

I am from a small town in Manikganj, a place named Pouli. I was born to a poor family on 30 June 1986. The name of my mother is Rijia Begum and my father's name is Md Ismail Hossain. In our family there are four sisters, myself and one other brother. I am the youngest. My father is a farmer, and my mother is a housewife. Our family is very big and we had a small piece of land only, and a small house. In that house there were two small rooms which had to accommodate all the family members. But there was a lot of love in that house. When I was five years old I started to go to school.

To cover the family's cost of living and the educational expenses of the children, my father would leave for his work before dawn every morning. My father worked at the brickfield and after work finished he would come back home after lunch. I noticed that my father never took his meal properly, nor his bath. After lunch he went and did some work on other people's land. From our land we can only subsist for three months a year, and that's why my father had to do work on other people's land. At night my father would return home with a tired body. Sitting in the yard outside, my father would call me, 'My son', and I would rush out to meet him. Father hugged me and looked into my eyes and the sweat of my father's body wet my own body. My father said the sufferings of his day disappear with that hug.

That's when I decided that when I grow up I would stand beside my father and wash away his sufferings. I dreamed I would either be very famous by studying hard, or I would be a day labourer like my father. As we kids got older, the educational expenses and other needs of the family also increased. With the earnings of my father the situation became very hard to maintain because in our family there was nobody to stand beside my father and help him. I have one elder brother but he is simple-minded and cannot help. Sometimes he stays in my house and sometimes in another relative's house. Here in our family the days pass and the tower of poverty rises. My elder sister was studying in Grade 9, the second sister in Grade 8, the third in Grade 6 and the youngest in Grade 4. I was in Grade 3 at that time.

Maintaining our educational expenses was becoming quite impossible for my father. Sometimes, I went to school without a pen or other things. Most of the time I could not submit handwritten work to the teacher because I had nothing to write with. The teacher asked why I was not submitting the work and I said I did not have a pen or paper. The teacher told me to stand outside and tomorrow I must bring these items. After school, I asked my mother to buy the stationery because the teacher made me stand in front of the whole class for not doing the handwritten work. Mother said, 'If your father receives the wages on *hatbar* [market day] then you can buy the stationery.' I was thinking that for another two days I have to stand up in the class for the lack of handwritten homework.

The *hatbar* came and my father received his wages, but the money was depleted after buying all the subsistence items, like rice, and I couldn't buy my stationery. I came back home crying. Coming home, I spoke to my mother and demanded that she give me stationery or I would not attend school anymore. My mother told my father then I had to stop studying because the family could not afford it. My father needed to buy stationery and also pay the tuition fees. My mother advised my father to find some technical job for me because I am a boy. Father became angry with my mother but there was no choice but to send me to work in a car workshop. Hearing this, I became nervous and said that I would continue studying, even without the needed items.

I didn't attend school for two days because I feared the teacher would humiliate me again in front of the class. The next day, I went to school and took the stationery on credit. Returning home after school, I went to the river and sat there. There was a river beside our house and the sand was glittering. Some people shoveled the sand and sold it to the truck. There, one of my aunts and cousins also work. I thought I would do this work too. I asked them if I could join in, and they replied that I was too young to do physical labour. The aunt of my friend was also there and I confided to her that I must do the work. She agreed to help me and told me I needed a basket and spade.

At home, I managed to get a spade and basket, and the next day, waking up early in the morning, I went to the sandy place beside the river. My aunt showed me how to shovel and pile the sand. I did that work till 10am, then went home and took a shower. My mother asked me where I was and I replied that I

was doing a sand piling job. I asked her to give me breakfast and then I would go to school. At the end of the school day, after taking my meal, I again went to the river, because in the morning I couldn't pile enough sand to fill the truck. The leader of the work gang chided me for leaving before one truck was filled with sand. I disclosed to them my problem and they understood that I needed to go to school after 10am. After school, boys and girls my age play and get some pleasure, but in the afternoon, my time passed digging sand. From the next day, all the men with whom I worked helped me, because they understood my situation. Every day I did the work like that, with school in between. If I could not complete my sand pile the others helped me so that sometimes I did not need to dig the sand after school. In one week I did the job six days and on the seventh day I gave the work to one elder friend. The first salary was BDT120 (each day was BDT25). My mind was filled with joy receiving the money and I gave it to my mother to pay the shopkeeper for my stationery. I told her to give the rest of the money to my father for shopping. Hearing this, my mother started crying.

Five months passed and the rainy season came and there was water in the river, so the sand piling job stopped. I went to school and wondered what I would do. I went out on the road after school and I noticed a man with groundnuts. I stood near him and asked, 'Brother, if I want to start this business, how much money would I need?' He said BDT100–200 would be enough and I enquired about the details of the business. He said that I could get the nuts beside the vegetable shop. The next day, I stood on the road with a bag with one of my uncles. I went to the shop and asked my uncle to help me buy some items and I gave him the money. Uncle asked how many kilograms of nuts I would take. The shopkeeper said it was BDT35 for one *palla* [five kilograms]. Because my village is far away from the town, I asked my uncle to buy one *palla*.

After that, I went to school and after school my mother asked the purpose of buying the nuts. I told her I would sell it on the town road in the afternoon. I took it in the basket with some salt and chili powder and I sat at the roadside to sell to those who were finishing work. The road was very beautiful and there were no homes, only the trees. On one side was a field of crops and some barren land and beside that was a small stream. Because it was the rainy season, the water was deep and the weather was breezy. The people from the town came to this place for picnics and relaxing and I passed a nice afternoon in the guise of selling something. In that way, a few years passed with me studying and helping my family manage the family expenses.

In my primary school, the annual examination started and I passed well. I was very happy that I was going to be admitted to high school. I would study hard and become *boro lok* [a big man] and do a well-paid job. With dreams in my eyes, I would destroy the poverty of my family.

During the high school admission process my friends got admitted and I told my parents. My father said he needed to find out how much money would be needed for the admission. He found that the advance tuition fee, books and stationery would require BDT500–600. Hearing that, my mother told my father that I didn't need to study any more. She asked from where we would obtain the money to pay the school costs. Hearing that, my eyes filled with tears. It seemed that my tears were washing away the dreams. Coming out from the house, I sat at the bank of the river and cried, thinking about the consequences of my situation.

One of my friends saw me sitting like this for a long time and asked why I was sitting like this. I told him everything and he said he would see what he could do for me. I went with him to meet and talk to a distant relative in the town. Hearing my story, the relative said he would do something to help. After some days, the relative came to our house and talked with my parents and me. He asked many things and then he told my parents that the owner of one shop in town was looking for a worker. My relative asked my parents to allow me to go there and work and the owner will give me the time to study, with a monthly salary of BDT600. At first I didn't agree, but when he said the shop owner would allow me to study, I happily agreed.

The next day, the shop owner came to collect me and gave BDT600 to my parents. My parents were very happy. The owner of the shop took me to his house and introduced me to all his family members, seven people altogether. They asked about me but I didn't answer because I felt shy.

It is a new place and I don't know anybody. I am the son of a poor villager so I kept quiet. The shop owner took me to the shop after having my meal and there were three other workers there. Everybody called the owner *kaka* [uncle]. *Kaka* asked me to bring dinner from the house to the shop. We closed the shop and came back to his house. He told me that from today I would sleep in this room.

The next day, I went to the market with *Kaka* and, after returning, I had breakfast with everyone and took the breakfast to sell in the market. There were a lot of customers in the shop all the time. In that way, the time passed and I had to spend time at the shop. But I was not admitted into school. One day, I asked *Kaka* why I was not being taken to school for admission. The school was close to *Kaka's* house so he took me and finally I was admitted. The next day, I went to school after taking breakfast to the shop. I met with my friends and they were studying in the same school, so I began to feel better about my situation. We studied together and a few days passed like that. At lunch, I had a break and I also did my duty at the shop. Sometimes, I was told to sit in the shop at midday and it caused a lot of problems for my studies. Over time, I was asked to sit in the shop for a longer and longer time.

My work was cutting into my school time and I began to think my studies would not continue. So I came back to my home and I told my parents that I could not continue my studies whilst working at the shop because I have to stay there for too long a time. A couple of days later, *Kaka* came to bring me back but I refused. He said he would increase my salary to BDT1000 per month. My parents reminded me about the poverty of the family, without considering my wishes. There was also the future marriage ceremony of my sister and that required much money. So how could they provide my educational expenses as well?

My mother advised me to go back to the shop. My father requested *Kaka* to give an advance on my salary because of the marriage of my sister. *Kaka* said he would give BDT5000 to my father. I could not refuse so I went back to the shop. I thought that was the end of my studies and all my plans would stop here. My life contained no dream and no good job. Six more months passed before the debt was paid. I thought that education had also disappeared from my life. I came back home from the shop and told my parents I would not go to the shop again but start a shop in the village myself. My mother asked where I would get the money to do that. I asked her for a BDT20,000 bank loan. In that way, I started a small grocery shop.

It was going well and within seven months I paid back the bank loan. I expanded the shop slowly after that and bought some land and cows for my father. I organized the marriage of my second sister. In that way, I managed my family. Father was no longer working at the brickfield or cultivating other people's land. My father would not be tired anymore. With my family, my days were passed nicely. But suddenly my father became sick and was brought to hospital where he stayed for several days. The family had to spend a huge amount of money. Three months after returning home from hospital, my father died of a stroke. On 15 January 2002, after my father passed away, I realized there was no banyan tree covering my head anymore [no protection]. I became greatly frustrated. Previously, I had no stress but now it all came to my head. I still had to marry off my two other sisters. In frustration and tension my life continued.

What could I do? The second youngest sister is matched for marriage and the youngest one is very near to that stage. For the second youngest sister's marriage it was time for the ceremony. We had to give lots of gifts to the bridegroom [*joutok*; lit. dowry]. I needed BDT150,000 and I didn't know where to get the money. My savings were gone after my father's medical treatment, so I sold my father's land to pay the *joutok*. The days passed well after that problem was solved, and my shop was going on well. Each month the profit was BDT8,000–10,000. Most of my friends from neighbouring villages came to my shop to buy their provisions. One day, one of these friends told me that everybody is going to Singapore, and I

asked how. He said that with a little money and some training, they are going. My friend asked if I would also join.

I said I didn't know anything about this and had never heard about it before. Besides, I had no ability to go to the training centre. How could I manage the BDT400,000–500,000 to go to Singapore? This had never been part of my dream. My friends said I was a fool; if I had the training, I could earn a lot of money. I said to my friend that I was okay staying with my family. He called me a fool and said if I go to Singapore I would get BDT50,000–60,000 each month. I asked what work I would be doing to get this kind of money and he replied that the wage rate is very high in Singapore. 'Let's go, brother', he said. My friend was trying for this dream and he also tried to make it my dream. He convinced me that I could start a big business after a few years in Singapore. My friend finally convinced me to go with him to the training centre in Dhaka to hear the details.

We spoke to the trainees and they talked like my friend and instilled another dream in my mind. My friend asked the training centre teacher how to go to Singapore and he replied that it's very easy to go to Singapore now. They would give the training and send us to Singapore. We needed only to complete the admission at the training centre. He said BDT35,000 was all that was needed and then BDT215,000 was to be paid later. I said it was a huge amount to pay but the teacher said that after working for just a few months I could get this money back. So I agreed and went home to discuss it with my family.

I needed to discuss with my mother where to get the money. I told her only BDT35,000 was needed straightaway, but my mother wanted to discuss this matter with my sisters and brother-in-law. I had no money in savings and by selling the shop I could only get about BDT50,000. I asked if it was possible to get a loan from them, assuring them I could pay repay it after going to Singapore. But the three brothers-in-law could still only give me BDT150,000. I was wondering how I could collect the rest of the money.

My friend persisted about the admission and offered to lend me the rest when I wasn't able to manage it from my family. He really insisted so we were admitted together. The teacher said that within five days we would have to commence the training. Back home I told my mother I was admitted. She asked how I had managed it and I told her that my friend, Shafiq, loaned me the admission money. Within five days I sold my shop for BDT58,000 and my friend and I went to the training centre. Two and a half months later, I was eligible to sit the test and I passed. For the first time in my life I was happy, because my anxiety about not studying had left me and my dream had returned to my mind.

The training was very hard. There were so many difficulties because of the food and the shower and the long class hours, so it was a relief to pass. The teacher said that a few days after passing the test I could go to Singapore and I was to arrange the money for the fee. If the IPA was okay and I collected the money, then I could go. I took a bank loan of BDT50,000, but then the teacher informed me that they could not send me yet. They said it could be a long time, perhaps six to seven months, and they didn't offer any alternative to going through the training centre.

I asked for my passport back and they said I would need to pay BDT150,000 for that. Also, I may have to pay even more money now than I expected to continue my passage to Singapore. I paid the money to get my passport back. To organize the IPA through another recruiter, I needed to pay BDT225,000. I borrowed the money and, finally, I came to the country of my dreams.

I worked in my company for four years and suddenly one day I had an accident while doing the job. The company didn't take care of me, and didn't pay me the three months owed salary or the salary deduction of SGD1000 each year (in total SGD4000). I complained to MOM, but still now my case is continuing.

I don't know what will happen because my case is not yet finished. Till now I have suffered a financial loss from coming to Singapore. If MOM can help me to get back the money I was owed by the

company it would be very useful for me. I'm still in Singapore trying to recover the money I lost by working on a TJS job.

If my life story has given any pain to others, forgive me. I didn't write the story to give pain.

Chapter Two

Shariful

He left behind his young wife when he migrated to Singapore for a construction job. In June 2010, after working only two months and still in debt due to recruitment fees, he sustained an injury to his hip and back. When the company failed to pay his medical costs and MC wages, he left the company dormitory, fearing the company had a plan to deport him before he could seek assistance from MOM. Shariful underwent major surgery for his injured hip, but the surgery was not entirely successful and he was still in pain, and unsure of his ability to bear children, when he returned home to Bangladesh at the end of 2011.

His work injury compensation was settled in mid-2013 for about SGD30,000. This amount would have to last his entire life now that he was unable to perform physical work and his family no longer owned land that might provide fruit, vegetables, chickens and other foods. His wife did give birth a year after his return, but the family's future was uncertain as Shariful was unable to perform physical work or purchase land to provide for the family.

I was born on 15 April 1972 in Barishal District in the village of Bajitkha. There is a mosque in our locality and another beside my house. My religion is Islam. I've been married for four years. I stayed with my wife only for one month before coming to Singapore. After twenty months in Singapore I went back to my country to spend a year with my wife and within three months we conceived a child, which made both of us very happy. It was a matter of great regret that after six months of pregnancy my wife was in a lot of pain and had a miscarriage. We went to the doctor and took the ultrasound but we couldn't save the baby because of a tumour inside my wife's ovary. Within one week the tumour grew very big and we had to take her for surgery. If the surgery was delayed the tumour would have burst. The doctor tried to save the ovary and just cut the tumour, but he couldn't. That means that I am also half dead. It also means more responsibility on her other ovary. Allah is kind to save it and whatever Allah does it is for the good of mankind. After the operation, I stayed with my wife for another six months. The doctor said we should not try to conceive another baby for at least one year.

On 27 March 2010, I came back to Singapore; two months later I had a work accident. I talked to my wife every day by phone and she knew about my accident. Every day she asked me when I would come home and I always answered, 'Next month, next month.' 14 months passed like that, making my wife very sad. She became angry about the way we were passing our conjugal life; we didn't have a baby, and so many were dependent on me — my father, my mother, my wife, my two brothers and the cat named Pishu, a dog named Tomi, 50 pigeons, plus 10 or 12 hens, they were all dependent on me.

When I first came to Singapore, I stayed in a dormitory and the room was 25 feet long and 10 feet wide. There were 12 double beds for 24 workers to sleep together in a room hardly cooled by four ceiling fans. The breathing of one was felt by the others. The cooking facility was 100 meters away in another building. Bedbugs sucked half my blood and when I went out it felt like the bedbugs were still beneath my skin. Sometimes one or two bedbugs could be found in my shirt.

When I worked in Bangladesh my salary was enough to meet the needs of my family. I worked in an electrical factory and my salary was BDT5,000 per month, with BDT2,000 in overtime, a total of BDT7,000. The educational expenses of my brother, the plain rice, our ordinary clothes, were affordable. But there was nothing to save for me, so if I wanted to do something more there was no way to plan for the future. I could find no way to elevate myself. In the newspaper I read about the high salary earned from working abroad.

One of my neighbours lives abroad in Italy and sends a lot of money to his family. He bought some land and made a very nice house. That is why I thought I'd like to go to Italy to work. My neighbour's uncle sends people to Italy to work; some make it, and some are caught. If the men are caught, then they must get their money back. He sends the people to Italy with fake visas. He told me it would cost BDT400,000, but I couldn't manage that money.

Some time later, the MP [Member of Parliament] of our area advised me to have training and go to Singapore because the salary is the same as Italy and I'd have a better chance of getting a job. The MP recommended an agency in Gulshan, Dhaka, named Blue Star Agency. The agency said I have to undergo skills training and if I fail the test they would arrange another training session. The total amount needed was BDT180,000. Out of that, BDT120,000 would be paid in Bangladesh, and the other BDT60,000 would be deducted from my salary. The job would be construction, and every month, with overtime, I could earn BDT50,000. The accommodation is free, but I must pay for my own food. Sometimes, the boss would give food. The working time was 8am till 5pm and sometimes there would be overtime from 8–10pm. The company is a main con. I signed the contract paper with those conditions.

I completed the training, passed the skills test two months later, and came to Singapore with a legitimate visa. But after arriving, I discovered that it is a supply company, not a main contractor. To start work at 8am I needed to wake up at 4am — to queue for the toilet and take the company lorry to the job site — and there was no overtime. The workday that was supposed to end at 5pm actually finished at 9pm, but no overtime was paid. If I asked the Singapore agent about this, he said that this arrangement

was confirmed with the Bangladeshi agent. If I ask the Bangladeshi agent, he said he didn't discuss it like that with the Singapore agent. The Bangladeshi agent said to work for one year and then come back and we will change you to a good company and arrange a fee lower for you.

All the money to come to Singapore was borrowed with interest and taken from selling my father's land. My father also gave me some money and I had some as well. The huge trees on my father's land were also sold. It was very hard for the village people to raise BDT100,000 at that time. If you want to sell anything, the price is low; something worth BDT5 was sold for BDT2.

I was given construction work, which was what was promised, but the problem was the working hours and the salary. We had to work 14 hours, even though the duty was supposed to only be eight hours with around two or three hours of overtime. The agent said that the salary would be BDT50,000, but I only got BDT25,000 a month. Sometimes, the working place is far away, and sometimes it's near, and some days there was no job at all. In that way I passed my life.

It is a matter of great regret that on 27 March 2010, after coming from Bangladesh to a new company where I expected to be making ceiling partitions, I was given a hacking job, which involved demolishing old structures instead. After working for only two months, on 8 June 2010, I had an accident but the boss wouldn't take me to the hospital. I waited for three or four hours before the security officer called an ambulance. After three days in the hospital, I returned to the dormitory and stayed there for 23 days. After that my boss tried to send me back to Bangladesh with the help of a gangster.

Finding no way to resolve the matter with my employer, I sought a lawyer's help. My boss consequently cut my permit and so MOM conferred me with a Special Pass on 13 August 2010. My family knows my situation. I had to take a loan of SGD500 from my friend to survive after I left the company dormitory. After 10 months, my boss was forced to settle my MC wages. Financial crisis is the immediate problem after going on the Special Pass; if there was no NGO food program then the people on the Special Pass would die. Organizations like that stand beside us and support our needs and only in that way we can survive. We can rent a bed space but after one month we have to shift if we can't pay. It is very expensive and men with injuries cannot climb up to the top bunk. If there is no money for bed space then the Special Pass men must stay in the park or at the train station. In that case the police may come and ask why we are sleeping there. If we show our Special Pass, the police will leave us, or sometimes advise us to stay in the company dormitory. But if we stay there we will be abused and threatened.

My mental condition was very bad when I went on the Special Pass. I couldn't even go out for a walk. I had to stay alone and it was disturbing. My wife became very angry when I talked on the phone with her. This lifestyle is very painful. My health was also not improving. Life was just pain and more pain. After I had the hip operation, the feeling in my leg diminished and my sex power also reduced. I am the only person who understands my feelings.

Pain is my life, pain is my death, pain is my laughter, pain is my tears.

After I go back home I have a plan, but only if my body is okay. If my health is okay I want to help the poor and unemployed people through religious activities. If Allah saves me I will also do a business by myself and expand it. I will begin by trying to buy and stock food for resale later and then use the money to start a business. I also wish to try for a child with my wife.

1 May 2011 (Sunday)

Today, 1 May, at 5.30am I woke up and brushed my teeth and did the *ozū* and the *fajr* prayer. At 6.30am I went to Suntec City with my friends. Electronic materials could be found there at a cheap price and my friend wanted to buy something. The shop opened at 11am, but people waited in the queue overnight. Some people were lying down on sheets and others were sitting on cartons and playing cards. Others were

sleeping. My friend and I joined the queue of 500 people or more. The police checked that the queue was orderly. At 10am I was taken to the fourth floor and given one ticket to purchase electrical goods. My friend bought an LED television for SGD200. I lamented because I couldn't buy the cheap DVD player that my wife always wanted.

With much disappointment, at 2pm I went home and had a shower. Then I went to the mosque and took the *dhuhr* prayer. After that I slept and woke up at 5pm and did the 'asr prayer and waited till the evening time inside the mosque. I ate at my house and then went to the mosque again and did the 'isha prayer and at the end of this I said the Holy Qur'an. At 11pm, I went home and slept. My wife called but I didn't receive the call because there was not enough money.

2 May 2011 (Monday)

Like every day, I woke up early in the morning. Last night I didn't have a good sleep. Yesterday my friend bought the television but for lack of money I didn't buy anything for my wife. What kind of husband am I? I tossed and turned and in that way my night passed. I woke up at 5.40am. I freshened up in the bathroom. Then I went to the mosque and two times I completed *sunnah*. I did the prayer in the correct way and at the end of the prayer I listened as my friend recited Islamic *hadith*. Sometimes I myself recite the Holy Qur'an. The time was 7.30am when I went to Isthana cafe and took the free breakfast. After that I went to the room and slept for a while and wrote yesterday's activities. My friends and I finished cooking lunch at 12.30pm. After that I went to the mosque for *dhuhr* prayer and then went home and ate the lunch we prepared. I lay down on the bed and within a short time sleep came. I went to the bathroom and washed and then went to the mosque for the 'asr prayer. After that I called my wife in Bangladesh and talked for only two or three minutes because there was not enough money in the phone. I waited at the mosque for the *maghrib* prayer, then I went to Isthana for the free chicken briyani. After having my meal I did the 'isha prayer and my friend read the Holy Qur'an and I listened. At 11pm I went to the room and slept. After some time my sleep was broken and I thought about my wife.

3 May 2011 (Tuesday)

I felt good thinking about my wife and how I would hug and kiss her if I were in Bangladesh. In that way the morning came. I heard the chirping of birds all around. That was 5.30am. For 10 minutes or so I lay there resting and then I did *ozū* and I started out to the mosque. At the end of the prayer I read the Holy Qur'an. I went to Sutha's for breakfast. This is the cafe where the free food is given. I took dosai and tea. I came back home and I saw that my friends were watching a movie on TV. I also started to watch, but after a few minutes I had to go to MOM. The company manager would come [to bring my passport] as I have to get the Special Pass chop. The time given was 10am and the boss came at the agreed time. After getting the chop I came back home and showered. Already I heard the *azān* and had to go for the *dhuhr* prayer. I went quickly and after prayer I came back home. I had yesterday's curry, which I heated up with rice. After that I slept a little because it's 4.30pm. In the room I had my tea and went to the mosque for 'asr prayer. I discussed my case with my friends and at the *maghrib* time I prayed. At the end of prayer I went to Sutha's to take dinner. It didn't feel good as the food is not okay there. I felt hungry afterwards, but how else could I take food, as there was no money in my pocket. I went to the mosque and the time for 'isha prayer was on. I had my 'isha prayer and I talked to my wife and at 11 pm it's time to sleep.

4 May 2011 (Wednesday)

I slept well last night. My wife became very happy because I spoke with her on the phone. I set the alarm on the phone for 5.30am. The alarm rang and I went to the toilet and freshened up and did my *ozū* and prepared for the *fajr* prayer at the mosque. I had the *sunnah* and *fajr* prayer. After this my friend recited

the Islamic text. After hearing that I read the Holy Qur'an. Then I took breakfast at Isthana and I had roti, dhal and tea before going back to the room. I slept for a while. It was 10am. For many days there was a pain in my leg and hip so I took an appointment at SGH [Singapore General Hospital]. The doctor wanted to do the MRI at 2pm. I went home, took a shower and went to the mosque. At the end of the prayer I had rice and curry from a few days before and I lay down till 4.30pm. I had a coffee sachet with me and so I made some coffee. After that I went to the mosque for 'asr prayer. After reaching there I saw the prayer had already started. I stood in the line and I finished and sat for a while. I took the *maghrib* prayer and went to dinner at Isthana with two of my friends. I showed the card for free meals and was given the food. After that I did the 'isha prayer and read a holy text till 10.30pm. I talked to my wife and she pleaded with me to come back as soon as possible as she didn't feel good staying alone. When I woke up it was 5.30am.

5 May 2011 (Thursday)

On my mobile I set my alarm and when I looked at the mobile I saw the time for the *fajr* prayer had started. I got up faster and did the *ozū* and went to the mosque and did the *fajr* prayer and then I went to sit with a friend. That was 7.40am. Everybody said they would go to take breakfast at Isthana. Together all the Special Pass holders went and then we chatted for a while. The time was 9am and all went home and so I also came back. After my operation I cannot wait to be able to lie down. At 10.30am I woke up again and I had to cook lunch. If I cook then one dollar will do but if I have to buy then the cost will be four dollars. After cooking I took a shower and went to the mosque and did the *dhuhr* prayer, then I took my meal and lay down and awoke at 4.30pm. After washing I went to the mosque and did the 'asr prayer. After that prayer I listened to some Islamic speeches. From Malaysia one *Allamah* came. The time of *maghrib* was on. Then I went to Isthana and had my free meal before returning to the mosque at 11pm to continuing listening. Because today is Thursday, the mosque is open for the whole night to recite the Holy Qur'an. I was there till midnight, but even so I woke up at 4.30am when I did the *ozū* and read the Holy Qur'an till 6am.

6 May 2011 (Friday)

I went about my morning routine as usual. Tomorrow and Sunday the free meal program only gives one meal a day at lunchtime. I don't like the food at Sutha's, but thinking that there is no option and the meal is only provided once a day, I went there and took dosai, watery dahl and some tea. Then I came home and washed my clothes. I slept in the afternoon as usual and after that I went to the open field in Little India for a while and sat there. But I didn't feel good because there was no money in the pockets. When I went back to the room I talked to my wife and slept. [Here some entries were removed from the final book as Shafiqul's days continued in the same pattern for the rest of May].

31 May 2011 (Tuesday)

I didn't set the alarm on my mobile and I slept all night long. Waking up, I saw it was 7am already. I freshened up and since there was no space in my room I went to the mosque to pray, then to Sutha's for the free meal. I returned home and thought: As a man with a broken hip, what can I do when I return to Bangladesh? I cannot do any job, so how will I manage my expenses? I would feel very good if I already had a child. My wife is sick, so if she cannot give birth then what will happen. What would my life be like? How could I stay alone in my physical condition? It would be impossible for me to marry a second time. My wife would be very hurt if I marry for a second time. Actually I married only one woman, but I have been with a lot of women. That's why I have no wish to re-marry. I want a baby.

Going back to Bangladesh, I was thinking about where I would stay. It would be impossible to stay with my father. I need to rent a house, but it would be too expensive if I never get compensation. How could I raise the money? It was my brother and sister's wish that I stay with my father. That's why they never emptied the house. I've had a lot of hardship in my life. In my childhood, my younger sister and brother studied but I worked with my father and grandfather in the fields. In the village, I used to sell groceries in the market. If I hadn't worked it would have been impossible for my father to maintain the family. My sister passed secondary school and my elder brother passed the MA. After this I went to Dhaka and first took a job in a garment factory, and then another in an electrical shop. After that I joined a cable factory.

2 June 2011 (Thursday)

I slept well last night and awoke when the alarm on the mobile phone rang at 5.30am. I woke up quickly and did my household chores as usual. At 8am I went to Isthana for free food. Returning home I washed and ironed my pants and shirt, and sat and thought about my upcoming operation on 20 June. SGD28,000 would be required for the operation. If the boss gives the LOG [the letter of guarantee to cover the medical cost] it will be fine, but if he doesn't then it will be very difficult for me. My wife has become very angry with me because I am still in Singapore. She said that if I don't return within two months, she would go to her father's house. Oh Allah, do me a favour, and after the treatment arrange for me to return home as soon as possible. I was thinking a lot of things and I confided in Debbie Aunty from the NGO that was helping me. I had a lot of pain in my leg and Debbie Aunty said to first discuss the matter with my lawyer and if he did not take any action, she would assist me. Before going to sleep I had a long conversation with my wife and I wooed her before ending the call.

7 June 2011 (Tuesday)

Like every day I woke up early in the morning hearing the alarm of my mobile. I went to Sutha's cafe for breakfast, but I was reluctant to take it because it looked dirty. Despite this, there was no choice but to have one dosai and one tea. I went back home and wondered, sitting in my room, why there are so many problems in my life. My treatment was not going well. My accommodation was not good. The relationship with my wife was bad. I stay in Singapore and my wife is unhappy. Everything is wanting and no need is satisfied. I feel the pain in my leg, but even so I did my prayers regularly. In Bangladesh I had built a mosque and young children and adults regularly go there.

14 June 2011 (Tuesday)

I couldn't sleep, but for what reason I don't know. At 3am I woke up and thought about my wife. It didn't feel good to miss her so. At 4.30am I arose and did my usual chores. I wrote in my diary as usual and after the 'asr prayer I went with one brother to help him with some work and then I went to the mosque. After completing the *maghrib* prayer I went to Sutha's and took the food but the food is not fresh and smells bad. After doing the 'isha prayer I listened to the Holy Qur'an. I talked with my wife and she also did not feel well. Her father came to our house to take her home with him and she went. She asked me if she should go or not and, getting angry, I told her to go. I was angry because I was soon to have my operation and here she was, going back to her father's house.

15 June 2011 (Wednesday)

I woke up as I do every day at dawn, rising at 5.30am to do my usual chores. My stomach was burning with hunger. I went to Isthana, and after having breakfast, I sat for a while with the volunteers and

chatted. I felt a lot of pain in my leg and so I went home and lay down on the bed and rested. After midday I cooked rice and heated up the curry from the day before. I went to the mosque for three hours then came home, took coffee and wrote in my diary. I did the *'asr*, *maghrib* and *'isha* prayers and after that I talked to my wife and also to my mother. I had no money and one friend said that if I collect empty cans every day I could get enough money to cover my daily expenses. How long could I sit idly like this? Today I picked up some cans. Now I will sleep.

19 June 2011 (Sunday)

I woke up at 5.30am and did the *fajr* prayer. Today there is no free food and that's why I cooked rice and fried an egg. With tea, that is my breakfast. I went to the market as there was nothing in the house to cook for lunch. I bought some vegetables and fish, and after I cooked I made five servings and kept four. I will use the rest of the servings after returning from the hospital. I went to the mosque. Today is Sunday and there is a discussion on Islamic topics. Before the *maghrib* prayer I listened to the Islamic discussion. After the prayer I came back home and took rice, and after dinner I went back to the mosque. I came back to my room and organized my papers and clothes for the hospital. I talked with my wife and parents. This could be the last conversation with them in my life. I tried to console my wife and told her I will call again tomorrow after reaching the hospital and then I ended the call. I called my younger brother and he also cried. He told me to call again after going to the hospital, and he asked if someone will accompany me. I said there was nobody, as all were busy. I said I have an American friend who will accompany me.

22 June 2011 (Wednesday)

At night I woke up uncomfortable with the saline drip and the catheter inserted. I twisted and turned in the bed until early morning. In the gap of the closed window I could see the white sky. On my mobile I could see that the time was 4.30am. The nurse came in to check my blood pressure. Then she went away and I slept again. Sometime later I heard the nurse calling my name and I opened my eyes and saw that she brought the mouthwash for me to gargle. After that she went away again. I recited the name of Allah. Then breakfast was on my table. Again I lay down and recited Allah's name again and made some *dua* [religious chanting]. After a while I watched television and my nurse came and said my wound needed to be dressed. She told me to lay on my side and after changing the dressing she left. Again I watched television. It was 12 noon and I had my lunch. I slept again and woke up at 3pm and the doctor checked me. When he left I took coffee and cake and watched television again. At 6pm I took a meal again. At 9pm the nurse came to check my blood pressure. Another nurse gave me Milo and biscuits and then she left. At 11pm, I slept.

23 June 2011 (Thursday)

At night I woke up a few times. It was a restless sleep and in the morning I needed to pass a bowel motion. I pressed the call button and the nurse came to assist me. She held my hand and guided me and told me to press the call button when I'm finished and she will help me back to bed. After a while the nurse came to check my blood pressure. She went away and after a while came with the mouthwash. At 8am, a nurse came and told me to take my breakfast. I sat for a while and then watched television. At 10am, the nurse came and assisted me with the shower. After going back to bed, I slept and then took my lunch. The doctor came and checked me and told me that the operation went well. I lay on the bed watching television and then the physiotherapist came and straightened my leg. At 3pm, I had some afternoon tea and watched television until 6pm, when dinner came. The nurse checked my blood pressure and I slept after that. At 9pm, the nurse again came and gave me some Milo. At 11pm, I went to sleep.

27 June 2011 (Sunday)

Today I woke up at 5.30am and my blood pressure will not be checked because I'm okay now. I called the nurse to assist me to the toilet. Today I can go by myself but the nurse insisted I didn't go alone. She advised me to call her if I wanted to go anywhere. After breakfast I sat for a while and the nurse told me to take a shower. She helped me back to bed and the physiotherapist came and made me walk around. Then I watched television. At 11am, the nurse said I needed to go for an X-ray and guided me in the wheelchair. Lunch was ready when I got back to the room. I sat for a while and then slept till 3pm. I saw that coffee and cake had come again. I ate it and watched television and it was dinnertime again. I was thinking that for eight days at the hospital I did not do my prayers. Neither can I take a shower or go to the toilet by myself. Two visitors came to visit that day.

[Shafiqul returned to his bed space in Little India the following day, 28 June 2011]

1 July 2011 (Friday)

Last night I slept well. After waking I saw it was 7am. After I freshened up, I made coffee and had biscuits, and for lunch and dinner I cooked rice. I lay down because there was some pain. I was scared to walk too much. Despite this, I took the walking stick and did the physiotherapy by myself. I had lunch at 12 noon. There was curry inside the fridge. The doctor had said I could be released from hospital if there was someone in my room to assist me. In my room I had many friends, but they had all gone for work. That's why I did the tasks myself. The doctor told me to walk and attend to my needs by myself if possible. I must be careful when I walk.

10 July 2011 (Sunday)

Like every day I woke up at 5.30am. After freshening up I went to the mosque and recited the Holy Qur'an. After having breakfast at Isthana I went back to the room and slept for a while. I went to the hospital to have my wound dressing changed and then I went to the mosque for the *dhuhr* prayer. After the *asr* prayer I went to the Old Market and bought some good things to take back to Bangladesh, like a ladies' handbag and a frying pan. After coming back I had my free meal at Isthana. Then I lay down at the mosque and had *'isha* prayer. I talked to my wife, sister and brother-in-law. All are worried for me. How could I pass the rest of my life? I have to make one baby. My wife is also not well. I will sleep now.

13 July 2011 (Wednesday)

I woke up very early in the morning to go to the toilet. I saw the time is 5.30am. I washed my face and did my prayer. After that I went to Isthana for breakfast and returned to my room. Nothing felt good to me. After the operation I felt less pain for one month, but after that it started to hurt a lot. I went to see the doctor and he gave me painkillers and told me to exercise more. But that is not useful advice. If I take painkillers the pain goes down for a while, but otherwise it is the same. The doctor said he had already given me the percentage [for permanent incapacity] and told me to go to MOM and take the compensation money. After that I could return to Bangladesh. I have been waiting for the money but MOM has not informed me about it. It is 12 noon and I cook food and heat up my curry. Then I took a shower and went to the mosque. After finishing the *dhuhr* prayer I came home and finished my lunch. I went to the hospital to have my wound dressed and the nurse said the wound is better so the bandage can be taken off. After I came back to my room I performed the prayer. At night I spoke to my wife and my mobile balance finished, so I slept.

14 July 2011 (Thursday)

I woke up with worry and I saw on my mobile phone it is 4am, so I lay down for a while and I could not express how I was feeling. It did not feel good to be waiting in Singapore anymore. Again, I closed my eyes for a while and when I woke up again it was 5.30am. I washed myself and finished reciting the prayer. Then I went to Sutha's for the free breakfast and after that to MOM but there is no news. How many times I went to MOM and still no news. My pain has increased since the operation in both hips. It's 11.30am and I have to go to the physiotherapist. I took a shower and cooked rice and then I went to the mosque and did my prayer, after which I went directly to the hospital for my appointment. The doctor checked me and I did some exercises for 45 minutes. Coming back, I went to the mosque for prayer, but if there is too much pain how can I pray. I went to Sutha's for dinner and I talked to my wife and kissed her over her two cheeks over the phone. I cut the line and went to sleep.

21 July 2011 (Thursday)

Like every day I woke up early in the morning. This morning I had very big tension in my head. After going to the mosque I went to Sutha's and had my free breakfast and after returning to my room I lay down till 10am. I cooked rice, took a shower, had my meal and went to the hospital. At 2pm I had an appointment with the doctor to check my blood and urine and I heard it is very painful to check the urine. I didn't want to do it. The doctor said if he never checks it he cannot make an assessment. He made me lie down on the bed and he pushed two thin tubes into my penis and I felt as if I was dying of pain. Then he connected the tubes to a machine and pulled them out again. Again, they pushed it inside my penis. It was four feet long and I was crying like I was dying. They couldn't get the connection with the machine. I said to the doctor that it's better not to do this test. Then another nurse came and found the outside joint is loose. She joined it and poured the water inside the tube. Neither the doctor nor nurse know anything! After returning home I took a shower again. I had my meal and slept. I went to the mosque and performed the prayer and talked to my wife and at last I slept.

23 July 2011 (Saturday)

Like every other day I woke early, freshened up, went to the mosque and then went to Isthana for free breakfast. After having my breakfast I went to NUH. From Bangladesh one of my uncles had come to see the doctor but he couldn't speak English. He had cancer. I took him to NUH in the morning to do the CT scan and chemotherapy. It took four hours to complete everything. After that I went home, cooked food and had lunch. My head and legs were filled with pain, so I lay down on the bed and slept. After waking I wrote in my diary and had tea. I did my prayer and then went to Isthana for free dinner. After dinner I went back to the mosque and performed the 'isha prayer and read the Holy Qur'an. I spoke to my wife who became impatient on the phone. She asked me again when I am returning to Bangladesh. I calmed her and then I watched television and slept.

24 July 2011 (Sunday)

Sleep never came. I went to the mosque and slept there last night. I went home to shower, then to the mosque again to pray and then to Sutha's for breakfast. After that I came back to my room and fell into thought. I had five operations in my life: my first operation was for piles; my second in Singapore when I cut the vein of my left wrist whilst doing a painting job; the third was when the skin on my left elbow was cut and hit the bone whilst I was working. Even now if I stretch my hand I feel pain in the elbow area. My fourth operation is on my spinal cord due to an accident whilst I was breaking a brick wall. Suddenly some parts hit my elbow and a big fleck hit my backbone above my hip, which is how my backbone became displaced.

After the Operation

After staying in the hospital for eight days the company gave me MC for eight months. My pain lessened for a few months after the backbone operation, but then it started again. The doctor gave me MC and painkillers. In this way I passed a long five months in 2011. But the pain began to increase and when I can't control it sometimes I cry. I was given the same painkillers and the doctor advised me to have an X-ray. He gave me more MC and after one month told me to return for another check-up. The X-ray didn't show clearly what the problem was, so I needed to have an MRI. I had to see the physiotherapist once or twice a month. The MRI showed that the back problem was more severe than before. He said it is injured again, perhaps as a result of moving incorrectly. He advised me to go back to my country and do the treatment there. I refused and told the doctor I would have my treatment in Singapore. He said it required SGD35,000, and after I agreed, he confirmed the operation date. I requested that he write a letter to MOM for permission to stay for the operation, which he wrote.

Chapter Three

Aziz

Aziz came to Singapore in early 2013 to work in a small construction subcontracting company fitting air-conditioning ducts. He worked for almost a year but was paid for only two months. After leaving the company with eighteen other men to lodge a claim at MOM, he was placed on a Special Pass and the case was recognized by Singapore's Trafficking in Persons Taskforce as having strong indicators of trafficking.

Aziz wrote a chapter in Volume One of *A Thousand and One Days*, detailing his experience of labour exploitation in his company. Since deserting his workplace in February 2013, Aziz has remained on a Special Pass until the time of the publication of this book, approximately two years and eight months later. He is desperate to return home and be with his wife, whom he married over the phone in 2012, since he was not permitted to leave Singapore. He is afraid that she will quit the marriage if he does not return soon. We have included a second entry here which details his life for the time he has spent on a Special Pass. It includes details of a TJS company that exploited him in ways disturbingly similar to that of the company where he'd worked previously.

Leaving us, the boss went away angrily to talk to the driver. We all sat exhausted under a tree. Somebody fell asleep. Then one person suggested we go to MOM. We all agreed. But how could we go? Nobody had money. For six months the salary wasn't given. It was then that I met one of my friends and disclosed to him everything and borrowed SGD100 dollars from him. That's how we went to MOM.

The MOM officer was astonished hearing us and gave us hope when he said that we would get our money back. We were given Special Passes and told to go back to our company dormitory. Coming out of MOM, we met Mustafa *bhai* who fled Allinze one week previously, and he informed us about Dibashram. We all went there and saw that we, who were suffering workers, who were deceived in coming to Singapore, who didn't get the right justice from MOM, were helped free of cost.

When we returned to the company dormitory, we realised that we were forbidden from working. How could we eat in that condition? How could we go out? With that came more problems. MOM also didn't take care of us when we received the Special Pass. What we ate, where we stayed, how we moved around – they didn't do anything to help with that. Just four days later, a woman named Dr Sallie from Dibashram came to visit us. She asked us everything. She took all the details of our situation and when she left, gave money to all. We maintain our normal life with that, at least for a few days.

After that, news came from MOM that all of us had to go to the dormitory arranged by MOM. That was Kranji Lodge. The accommodation in the dormitory was free and we had to report to MOM every week. The car was arranged by MOM. But had we come to Singapore just to eat and do nothing? We had our families to support. Who would look after our fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers? My family began to focus on the money. Money was needed for everything at home, so at the end of each month, who would manage that?

I began to spend a lot of time just thinking about my situation. How fast the time was passing! Our sufferings were not finishing. After two months, the MOM officer told me to find a company for six months under a scheme called TJS. Where could we find the company? Two more months passed like that. One day I went to take the chop at MOM and saw an Indian Tamil man sitting on a chair at the entrance. He asked me if I wanted a job. I had borne as much suffering as I could, so I would refuse to go to a company like the one that had ruined my life. I hoped this company would not be like that.

The man was talking over and over again about the good conditions of the company. I asked him where the owner of the company is from, and he replied that the owner is a Singaporean. Hearing that, I agreed to work there. Then he applied for a permit under the TJS for me. After 15 days the IPA was ready and I went to the company. The company's name was TTJ Lodge, in Jalan Papan.

I started a new life under this company's instruction. The working time was 6pm till 10am the following day. Despite these long hours, I was consoled by the fact that I had at least started to work again. There was no other choice in any case, because thinking of my family, I had to overcome all the suffering.

The basic salary of that company was SGD500 a month. I had to work overtime to earn a salary of up to SGD1000. Despite this, I still managed to continue the job. Working 16 hours a night, I still couldn't sleep soundly because 16 of us shared a small dormitory room. Imagine the suffering of working 16 hours straight and then not being able to sleep. There was no way to sleep even a bit after doing such hard work. I kept thinking about my mother over and over again during those sleepless nights. When I was at home in Bangladesh I didn't do any work. My mother fed me good food and I slept peacefully in my bed each night. What a peaceful life it was. With those memories tears fell from my eyes.

Mother had become old. When I was younger, my parents took responsibility for me, but now I had become older and it was my responsibility to look after them. I hadn't understood that life was so hard. Ten months of sleepless nights passed with me thinking about that.

In the midst of that, Eid came. The *Eid* of Ramadan, the largest religious festival of Bangladesh, approached. What a joy it was when I celebrated this day with Mother and Father. On *Eid* day what fun I had, praying and wearing new clothes. The memory was painful to me in my current state.

I have three sisters. When I came to Singapore there was nobody to give money. Only my friends, whom I call my closest brothers, were there with me. I will never forget that they were with me during so many of my problems. My blood brothers in Bangladesh could not help me financially, so I thought about asking help from my sisters. But they were all married and living away from home, so they could not help me.

After *Eid*, life's daily struggle began again. 16 hours work at a time, from night 6pm to morning 10am. There was no good condition of sleep after working 16 hours in the company. The day and night shift workers stayed together in the same room, which is why sleep was so difficult. I had no choice but to continue on in that way. I lived in the hope that happiness would come one day. I counted the days as they passed and looked for a path to the future. Would the day of happiness ever come or would my dream float in the darkness? Waiting, I counted the days.

I didn't feel good about anything then because I was supposed to be living with my mother and father that time of my life. I was supposed to be preparing a family with my wife. But when would that day come? Would that day really come or would it remain a dream? Those thoughts had been eating me up and reducing me to tiny particles.

Five years I had stayed in Singapore. In all that time I wasn't able to repay the debt from the fees I had paid to migrate because my previous boss at Allinze hadn't paid me and hadn't given us proper work. I had spent my time working only for the benefit of the boss and not for myself. Then when I took the TJS job from MOM, had my situation changed?

Yes, I had paid off my debt at last, and it was like a weight lifted because no one would be harassing me for money now. But I had no money left [savings from migration] for myself to live and start a business after going home to Bangladesh. That's why I have to stay more years in Singapore; otherwise it would be impossible for me to do anything.

My family keeps calling me to urge me to come home as soon as possible, but how could I go? If I were to return home everybody would be happy for a short while, but when they discovered that I didn't bring money with me everybody would gossip, 'What were you doing while you were abroad for so many days to bring nothing back?'

Actually, we migrant workers know how we suffer to earn money and how we send what we have to the family, whether or not we ourselves have anything to eat. Despite this there are people in our villages and even our own families who don't believe it. They think that we had wasted our money in Singapore. Thinking that made the situation so very painful for me.

Another six months passed. But I still hadn't finished paying for a house for my wife. That was my duty and not anyone else's. That idea ate at me constantly. So I continued working but my mind was not settled. I always thought of my childhood days. Would I get back those golden days? I wanted to return to those days where there was no poverty, no borrowing and debt problems. I wanted to be close to the person who gave birth to me, to those who made me an adult and stayed beside me in all my dangers. They had become old in my absence.

My father would never enjoy my homecoming or my earnings because he had passed away whilst I was labouring in Singapore. But for me the contribution he made to my life no other father would do. Out of my many brothers and sisters he gave all his earnings to me. He believed that I would preserve his prestige and would stand beside him. I also had that same wish. But my dream had broken into many fragments. Father couldn't enjoy anything now. That's why whatever wealth and money may come had lost its meaning. The one who brought me to this world and raised me would never see my future and I

could offer him nothing now. So I would still try for the sake of my mother. Might Allah give me that ability. Amen.

I want to go to home but I still cannot. My mother, my brothers and sisters and my relatives are waiting for me. My case still has not yet ended and I left TJJ Lodge because I could not stand the working hours and lack of sleep any longer. I was like a living ghost. MOM moved me back to Kranji Lodge and told me to find another TJS company. They told me nothing about my case. Four, then five months passed, and I still have not been able to find another TJS company. MOM informs me nothing about my case. The situation seems hopeless, my duty to my mother unfulfilled, my wife in a tender state. I have now been on a Special Pass for more than two years with nothing to show except having cleared my debt.

You all can pray for me that I might see the day when my life will change, the day when I can live in joy and laughter with everyone for the rest of my life.

Chapter Four

Mahi Uddin

Mahi Uddin was 35 years old when he arrived in Singapore in early June 2014. He was deployed in the same landscaping company as Hossain (Chapter Eight), where he undertook HDB block cleaning work. For this first job in Singapore, Mahi Uddin paid SGD12,500 in fees, but worked only one and a half months.

Before migrating to Singapore, he spent several years in the Bangladesh army. He used his army provident fund to pay part of his recruitment fees and borrowed the rest from a variety of sources. Mahi Uddin lost all his own money and has struggled to repay his loans through his work on the TJS. He remained idle on a Special Pass for several months before being allowed to take a TJS job.

During that time, his eight-year-old daughter was pulled out of school because the family was unable to cover the cost of her school fees, a source of extreme anxiety and shame for Mahi Uddin. Migration's Kids (see Our Projects) raised SGD800 for Mahi's wife to re-admit their daughter in school. At the time of publication, he remains in Singapore working on the TJS.

My name is Mahi Uddin. My date of birth is 12 June 1981. My birthplace is in Gaibandha District. I have two older sisters and one younger brother. We are a Muslim family. My father was working in Chittagong when I was born.

My Father's Bad Luck

He went to Iraq when I was one year old. Our family carried on in his absence and our situation got better during the five years he worked in Iraq. While he was away, my grandfather bought land with the money my father earned and later my uncle stole my father's land.

My grandfather was unwell due to paralysis. Exploiting the situation, my uncle took my grandfather to the registry office and transferred all the land from my father's name to his own name. After returning to Bangladesh, my father went to Dhaka to withdraw some money and it was then he discovered what happened.

I was only in primary school at that time. I asked my grandfather where he had gone and he replied that my uncle took him somewhere for his thumbprint. I told this to my mum, who then asked my uncle what he needed Grandfather's thumbprint for. My uncle said that my father had turned over in written form all my father's land. We were so angry because my father struggled to earn the money and it had all been taken away. My mother and uncle fought and he rushed at her with a weapon. In that angry state, unable to resolve the problem, my mum telegraphed my father in Dhaka informing him to come back home. My father came home the same night by train. Once he reached the village market, my father came to know the tricks of my uncle.

From there my father directly came to our house and saw that we were all crying. He gathered all four of us on his lap, hugged us and cried. We all went together to my grandfather and asked, 'Grandpa, why did you turn over the land to Uncle's name?' Grandfather couldn't explain clearly and said he didn't know what my uncle had written in those papers. We explained what happened and then he cursed my uncle. My uncle and my father have never reconciled since.

After stealing the land, my uncle also tried to drive us from our house. He locked us in our house and lit it on fire. We shouted and screamed, but nobody could open the doors. We thought that we would die that night. But my great aunt ran to our assistance and rescued us, breaking the doors with a hammer. After coming outside, we watched our house burn. Our village people tried to put out the fire, but three rooms had already burnt to ashes. My father was furious and that afternoon, he called a meeting with the honourable persons, chairman, and members of our village.

When he was called before the village council to explain his actions, my uncle's defense was, 'It is my house, my property, and all are in my name. So these people cannot stay here.' My father said nothing to his younger brother, and brought us out from the house and we took shelter in someone's house in another area. Father didn't say anything after all that happened to us, and never protested again. We had no money at that time. After staying a few days at that person's house, one of our distant relatives told my father he could give us some barren land to build a house. My father asked how he could make a house with no money to buy land or build rooms. One of our relatives lent us the money to buy a small house and told us we could pay back the money later. Finding no other way to make a home, we agreed to his offer and started to build. We finished one room and again encountered problems of maintaining the family. The education of us four children would certainly need money. That's when my father made the decision to go to Dhaka to work. That was in 1992. My elder sister was in Grade 9, I was in Grade 7, my youngest brother was studying in Grade 4, and my youngest sister was four years old and was not yet admitted to school. Father sent some money and with that amount the family barely managed to survive.

New Hardships

It was becoming very hard to continue to study, but we managed it somehow. In this way my elder sister sat the SSC exam in 1993 and passed. For admission to college she needed much money, but the question was how. My father came home and took my sister back to Dhaka to try and manage the college fees, while the rest of us stayed at home.

After paying the admission fee for college in Dhaka and putting her in college, it had become impossible to manage her college fees, our study expenses, and the needs of the family. So my sister dropped out of college and took a job in a garment factory. One year later, my father came home and stopped my younger brother's study and took him to Dhaka to learn motor mechanical work. I continued studying and in 1995, my father took all of us to Dhaka. Slowly we were able to pay back the money we'd borrowed to buy the land and build the rooms. Finally, I passed the SSC, but poverty never completely left our family.

I wanted to work to help my family, but my sister told me to continue studying at college. But that resulted in more poverty for my family. So I took a job in a garment factory to support my own education. It turned out that it wasn't possible to study as well, so I stopped and just did the job.

In November 1998, I saw advertisements for recruitment into the Bangladesh Army. I went on the day of recruitment and stood in line, but when my turn came I was rejected. After great effort and several more attempts, I was finally admitted. I lived a hard life there for several years. My family was so proud of me for being admitted into the army because when you retire you have government savings for life. When I resigned from the army in March 2010, the government put me in Rangpur jail for three months because I hadn't completed the contract. This would be another story if I wrote the history of my time in jail.

After being released from jail, I came home. During that time, my daughter had been born in my house. I should mention here that in 2004 I had married my cousin Rina. Although it was a relief to leave the army, it had helped my family situation enormously. In 2010, I was able to provide the dowry for my older sister's marriage, pay for my mother's kidney operation, and help my younger brother start a business. My youngest sister had also been studying with my help.

Going to Singapore

Even though coming home felt good, I began to wonder what job I would do now. I had learned to drive so I decided this was a good job for me. I found a job and continued working for two years. One day my uncle called me unexpectedly. Many greetings were exchanged and there was much talking and suddenly Uncle said that he was trying for a visa for Singapore and that he could bring one person with him. I didn't say yes or no, just that I had to discuss it with my family.

Uncle called again soon after and urged me to come to Singapore, telling me that it would be no problem and that my life would be stable. It indeed seemed it would be a good option for me. My father asked Uncle how much money would be needed. After talking to the agent, Uncle informed us that BDT640,000 would be needed. I gave BDT100,000 from my army pension to the agent to arrange my IPA. Five or six days passed when Uncle phoned to say the agent is asking for more money. He now wanted BDT810,000. My father scoffed that it would be impossible. The agent told Uncle that the BDT100,000 could not be returned, so my father and I became very distressed and felt great tension. We couldn't bear the thought of losing BDT100,000. After 15 days, the IPA came and my uncle sent the agent money in Singapore. We managed the full amount by selling the land, taking out a loan, and using all my pension money. I did my medical exam and other necessary tasks, counting the days to come to Singapore.

At last the day came. On 28 July 2010, at 11.55 pm, all my family saw me off at the airport. My uncle told me I would work as a cleaner, but when I saw the IPA it was written that I would work in

landscape and design. I questioned my uncle about it and he said he had discussed this with the agent; though the visa said landscaper, my job would be cleaner. My uncle assured me that the agent had said there will be no problem with this.

I reached Singapore at 6am on 29 July. The agent, whose name was Mizan, came to the airport to collect me. He brought me to Clementi by MRT. At the end of the night, he gave me a place to stay at the bin centre and said, 'You need to be ready at 9 o'clock to meet the supervisor.' The supervisor came and showed me Blocks 416 and 417 and said that was my duty area. I did the job according to his instructions. At lunch time the supervisor took me to the bin centre to eat and I asked him where I would be sleeping. He told me not to worry, that I would also sleep there in the bin centre. I fell into a slump, thinking how I would stay at the bin centre. The bin centre offered no atmosphere for living. There was rubbish and a terrible stench. I called Mizan and told him, 'I gave BDT800,000 to come to Singapore. I will not stay at a bin centre.' But he advised me to stay there or go back to Bangladesh. How could I go back after paying such a huge amount of money? The burden of debt at home weighed on my mind. So, with much pain, I agreed to stay at the bin centre.

One month and 20 days after arriving in Singapore, Mizan phoned me to go to MOM for my work permit. I continued working 12 hours a day. The accommodation was still a big problem and continuing work in those conditions was a struggle. My uncle came to visit me one day and reassured me, saying that it was a struggle, but that I would adjust. He told me he was returning to Bangladesh soon and not to worry, that Mizan would look after everything.

After two more months, Mizan came to me and said, 'Brother, your work permit is for landscaping, not cleaning. I must send you to Palms Landscaping.' I was angry and confused, and told him, 'You said that I had come as a cleaner and now you are telling me to go for gardening work. Why?' Mizan said it was the company boss who made the decision. All six of us working in the HDB as cleaners had to go at 10am the next morning to the landscaping company. Mizan didn't take us to do landscaping work though. We were taken to a rental house near Mustafa [Little India]. Mizan left us and said that he would call us later, but no call came. One Bangladeshi guy brought catered food to the house for us, but the quality of the food was so bad that it couldn't be expressed by speech. But for the sake of living, we had to eat it. The next day, we had no work, and again no phone call came, so one of us called Mizan and he said that from the first of the next month, we will start working at the landscaping company.

The first of the month came and went, and nothing happened. Suddenly Mizan called and said the boss wanted to talk to us that night. In front of City Square Mall, all were called in and the boss told us that tomorrow MOM requested that we all go there. Then the boss said, 'If the MOM officer asks you how much money had been taken from you to bring you in [agent's fees], you would say that you didn't pay any money.' If we didn't tell this lie, the boss said all of us would be sent back to Bangladesh. We all kept silent. Then he said, 'You will all say there was no job in your bosses' company and that's why you went to do the cleaning job.' Again, we didn't say anything to the boss. The seven of us discussed later and took the decision that we wouldn't lie to MOM, especially after coming by advancing so much money. The next morning, the manager of the boss took us to MOM by lorry. We each had an interview separately with the officer over two days. On the second day, Mizan was also called in. The MOM officer asked, 'Is he your agent?', and we said that he was. But Mizan denied that he was.

Suddenly, one night, the police came to where we were staying and said, 'There is no permission to live in this place so you must pack up your things and leave.' We were kicked out onto the streets with nowhere to sleep. We called Mizan but he didn't pick up. We spent the night under the staircase of an adjacent building. After spending such huge money, look at our situation in Singapore. The next day, we rented another room using our own money.

After some days, MOM called us and said, 'You entered Singapore on one visa for landscaping, but you did a different job, so you have to go back home to Bangladesh.' With that revelation, it seemed the sky had fallen on our heads. Who saw our crying that day? We pleaded to the MOM officer, 'Sir,

what will happen to us, to our money? We can't go back home in this condition.' The MOM officer said, 'You worked illegally, so you must go home.' We denied this accusation and argued that we were victims. Then he said to leave and he would call us back another day, without giving us any answers to our pleas.

With so much pain, we left MOM. Because of the tension in our minds we could not eat. The burden of debt was occupying our thoughts. There seemed no way out except suicide. Alas, abroad! For what had we come abroad? The nights and days were passing with thinking. After a few days, the MOM officer called again and told us to go to there. The officer told us he was placing us on a Special Pass and that we could look for another company under the TJS scheme.

Mizan was also given a Special Pass. He told us we could not work in Singapore on that visa [contrary to what the MOM officer had told us concerning the TJS]. We said to Mizan that we did not know any person in Singapore; we didn't know how to live, how to eat. Mizan replied, 'You didn't say as we had instructed you, so I can't do anything for you.' Saying that, he left.

The MOM officer gave us the number of an agency to find work with another company. We contacted that agency, but it was no use. Six months passed with no work, and I had to take a loan from my cousin at Mustafa. Back in Bangladesh, the debt had been increasing because of the interest and my lack of remittances. My wife had to borrow money for her daily expenses. In May 2014, while going for the chop, the supervisor of TTJ company was introduced to me. He asked us if we would like to work for his company. We replied, 'Whatever the work, we will apply.' He took a photocopy of our Special Passes, gave us his handphone number, and told us he would be in touch soon.

On 27 May 2014, we got our permits and started work in TTJ Company. We were paid a basic salary of SGD18 a day, which was not enough for us, considering our debts. If we worked in that way for two or three years, we still could not pay back the amount we paid in fees. Still, we had to work — every day we worked for 15 hours. Whilst working there Sallie *apu* was introduced to me by one of my friends. She helped us through an uncertain and difficult time. We were reassured to know that someone was taking an interest in us and our problems. Sallie *apu* found out from MOM that our case was finished and we would be sent home after the six months TJS job at TTJ company was finished. We thought again that it would be a big problem to go home with this debt. We hoped we could find some way to stay in Singapore and work. Sallie *apu* pleaded our case and managed for us the extension of our TJS. That is my situation now, and I don't know what the future holds for me.

Dear readers, if you read the story of my real life then you must pray for me if I could stay in this beautiful earth with my family and take my meal two times a day. I pray for you that Allah might fulfill the life of all with peace and happiness.

Chapter Five

Zainul

Zainul had been to Singapore a total of four times for work, each time yielding no financial benefit and forcing him further into debt. During his fourth migration in 2010, he experienced severe financial exploitation and subsequently departed the company to make a complaint to MOM. In a tactic typical of unscrupulous companies, his employer had copied Zainul's signature on to salary slips, to make it appear that Zainul had received his salary and was lying to MOM. Zainul made a police report about the false signatures and remained in Singapore for more than fourteen months until the police case and the MOM investigations were completed.

He returned home with the salary he was owed, and struggled to establish a small business in Bangladesh, hampered by the loss of capital as a result of his failed migration to Singapore. His prawn-rearing project failed when his workers were beaten and bloodied by thugs hired by a neighbour to destroy the business. He has come twice again to work in Singapore, and now finally works at a satisfactory job.

I was born on 7 November 1985 in Satkhira district. I am married, but I don't have kids. My father is a poor and old farmer. That's why, being the eldest son, all the family members are dependent on me: my father, mother, two younger brothers and one nephew whose mother, my sister, died. My five sisters are older than me and married, but the three younger boys still depend on me.

I studied biology at college. You may ask why I dropped out of that good situation. It's because my parents were getting old and my mother has suffered from paralysis since 1999. Even now, she cannot walk or sit for long without crying in pain. She lies in bed a lot. My aged father could no longer manage the money for my sick mother and my college fees. Sometimes, my father seemed angry with me and grumbled that I spent all my time studying and perhaps I should be working and earning money instead. Yes, my father is a poor farmer and that's why I came to Singapore: for financial solvency and to secure my future. I thought that if I could make money, maybe BDT10,00,000, then after coming back to Bangladesh I could start a business and that business would expand and my life would be filled with joy. I thought if I could stay for three to five years, then maybe I could see the face of happiness. Who doesn't want to live in happiness from doing a hard job? I wanted to return to Bangladesh after a few years to start a business. That's why I wanted to go, but my life has now become a diary.

I have come to Singapore four times now, but what a cruel fate; each time I returned home with more pain in my heart and frustration. You may ask why I feel like this, so let me tell you my tale.

First Migration

My friend Nahid and I studied at the same college. One day he asked if I'd like to go to Singapore. Nahid told me there's a training centre in Dhaka — after being admitted and passing the examination, you can go to Singapore. We went together and were admitted. The owner of the training centre is a Mr Mizan. His office is in Gulshan in Dhaka, but the training centre is situated in Dhurkamar Bara. I gave him BDT70,000 for admission. Mr Mizan gave me the condition that if I fail the exam, BDT35,000 of that deposit would be deducted. If I fail the test a second time, the other BDT35,000 would be deducted. Mr Mizan has a very big house in Gulshan.

I discussed this opportunity with my father and we subsequently sold one *bigha* of land. The rest of the money I borrowed from the moneylender at 20 per cent interest. Till now that path has not shown me the way of peace. I see only frustration, which is very painful. But thinking of happiness was like a trap. I agreed and the contract was signed.

If I passed, then I needed to pay BDT400,000 more for the placement in a company in Singapore. I passed. His training centre took SGD8,500 from me in total. But once my land was sold, my luck began to run out. As for the work, well, I was trained in electrical work. I supposed the work would be like an electrical repair shop, because that's what the agent had told me. But the first time I arrived in Singapore, I saw it wasn't like that. If I had known that before I left Bangladesh, I wouldn't have come to do this job. I was assigned work on top of buildings, fitting drainage pipes. My backbone became damaged from doing this. Every day, I needed to carry pipes that were 210 inches long and had some cement inside. I cried every day for a month. The pipe was so heavy because of the cement.

I tried to accept that having spent BDT400,000, I needed to stay. The agent said my salary would be SGD20 per day, but after coming, it was only SGD18. I was told that food and medicine would be given by the company, but after coming I had to pay for all my food. After one year and eight months of paying back the loan and interest, I went back to Bangladesh. From carrying those pipes I have pain in my backbone, which has become severe. Because of that pain I can't sit or stand for a long time. I went to see the doctor several times but it is useless. I don't know what will happen when I get old. I still feel that pain, even now.

Second & Third Migrations

In Singapore, I have no close relatives. An elder brother named Tansen from a neighbouring district lent me SGD5,000 for my second time coming to Singapore. I arrived in Singapore on 16 June 2009 and I paid SGD5,000 for agent's fees. I sat for a long time at Changi Airport on arrival, but the boss never came to collect me.

I was distressed when I discovered that my IPA was cancelled. This company's name is Lee Choon Huat Engineering Pty Ltd (Ang Mo Kio Industrial Estate 6). At the airport I waited all night till 10pm but nobody came to receive me. I took the MRT by myself to Mustafa Centre and in a Bangla shop I checked my IPA online and found it was cancelled. It was like a bolt of lightning struck my head. Underneath a tree near the mini-mart I lay down on the pavement and asked justice from the Almighty Allah, 'Oh Allah, I have taken SGD5,000. What will I do now?' I cried a lot and didn't know what to do. Within one night my SGD5,000 had vanished.

I called my friend and he came and consoled me and gave me some money to stay at a hotel in Little India. I stayed there for five days and didn't know what to do. My friend advised me to go to MOM. The Havelock MOM sent me to Kim Seng MOM and they listened to all of my experiences. I was given permission to take a TJS job.

The PS Lim boss went to MOM to recruit TJS workers and I was introduced to him. After the interview, I agreed to take a job at his company. The boss applied for me and the six-month IPA was made. But it is a sad matter that one day after the IPA was ready, my case was settled and Lee Choon Huat had already bought my air ticket. MOM called me to go and collect my air ticket. They told me my case had been settled and I must go back to Bangladesh. I said to MOM that I have just arrived in Singapore and had paid a lot of agent fees. I will die if I have to go back now. I won't go back. MOM said my case had been settled and the new permit had not yet been issued so I had to go back. I again requested they allow me to stay. MOM held a meeting about this, and about four hours later, the final decision came that I needed to go back, but that I could come back to work with PS Lim if I wanted.

I asked MOM how I could come to this company if the company doesn't have any quota. [To encourage companies to hire workers under the temporary job scheme, the MOM allows them to hire workers that exceed their quota, and thus avoid paying a higher levy.] The MOM said that the company was given a special quota for me. They said they had a conversation with the boss, and after one week, I could come back to Singapore and work for this company. Following this advice, I took the air ticket and went to the airport. The PS Lim boss met me at Changi Airport and he said that I needed to pay SGD2,200 if I wanted to come back to his company. I asked the boss why he was asking me to pay money since MOM gave them free quota for me. He just said that if I didn't give him money, he would never take me to his company.

What could I do? My SGD5,000 had vanished, and if this boss didn't take me back to his company then I might never be able to come to Singapore again. So I borrowed SGD500 from my friend, gave it to the boss, and said he could cut the rest of the money from my salary. The *shatan* [devil] boss said he wanted the cash in advance. I asked him where he thought I could get that money, since I have no money. After pleading and pleading, I went back to Bangladesh after giving him only SGD500. On 1 August 2009, I came back to PS Lim company. My permit was for one year. That year, my boss cut SGD2,200 from my salary for my permit. At the end of the year, I couldn't get my contract extended and I was sent back home. Somehow, I paid back the loan money, but I didn't have the money to come back again. I requested PS Lim company to bring me back again and they agreed.

Fourth Migration

The fourth time I came to Singapore was with PS Lim Construction in 2010. [The employer closed down the previous company and set up a new one with a slightly different name.] I started the job on 7 October, but after working for seven months, the company never paid me my salary. They just lent me money to buy some food; sometimes SGD20, or SGD50 or SGD100. After working for seven months, I was given a loan for SGD1,720, and on top of this loan money, my company owed me SGD4,854. The total salary was therefore SGD6,574. I informed the Bangladesh High Comm about this, but they didn't take any action. Then I went to MOM and told them of my problem: that I had worked from 7 October 2010 till 15 April 2011 but wasn't given any salary. I informed the MOM on 18 April 2011 and they advised me to submit a resignation letter to the company, saying, 'I will not continue working in your company and within one week my salary must be paid to me.' MOM also said that if they don't give the salary within one week, I was to return to MOM.

According to MOM's instructions, I sent the letter to my company but the company did not pay my salary. On 27 April, I went again to MOM, and was given a new date of 11 May 2011 for a meeting about my salary. I submitted my salary papers and other documents and they said they would call me to let me know the outcome.

When I got the Special Pass, I didn't have any money with me. At that time, one of my friends, Ali, gave me food and a place to sleep for a while. Maybe I caused him some problems for those 20 days that he let me sleep in his bed. If Ali hadn't helped me at that time, only Allah knows what would have happened to me.

At the first MOM meeting, my boss offered to pay me SGD1,300. The boss showed the amount I had borrowed already, but it was not correct because my boss copied my signature from the first loan document. There were four fraudulent signatures. In those four signature papers my boss meant to show I had taken SGD4,500. Another paper showed I supposedly took SGD4,770. My company was hoping to demonstrate that I had taken all my salary already and they only owed me SGD1,300. I told the MOM officer it is a false signature, and I was owed SGD4,854. The officer said today's meeting is finished. At the end of the meeting, I went with a volunteer from TWC2 to the police station and filed the report.

After filing a police report, I was called to MOM for a second meeting. The boss's son attended the second meeting, along with another company worker. A few days later, I was called in to Clementi police station and the police took my statement.

My Life on a Special Pass

16 July 2011

I woke up at 6am and said my prayers, and left the room at 9am. One of my friends, Nahid, was going back to Bangladesh and needed to buy some things, so I planned to help him. I stayed with him till 4pm, then went back to my room at 5pm and found no one had cooked rice, so I cooked some. After doing the prayer of *maghrib* and *'isha*, I called home in Bangladesh and my family asked me, 'What happened to you? Why haven't you sent money for so many months?' I couldn't answer.

18 July 2011

Like every day, I wake up in the morning and prayed. Today, I went to do some welding work and all day long I did hard labour. I was told I would be given cash money. At 7pm, the job was finished, but I was not given any money. I was hurt because of this. The guy who arranged the job was Bangladeshi and I'd heard that sometimes they don't pay anything for illegal jobs, and today I have seen that.

Anyway, after finishing work, I came back home and I had my dinner, but nothing feels good. All I could do was think about my problems. I called home. When I call home I feel very sad. This month I

could not send any money for my father and mother. They only want money but I couldn't tell them about my situation. If I tell them, they will think, 'This time you have the same problem again? Only you and not others?'

27 July 2011

Like every day, after completing my prayers, I prepared to go to work. Suddenly, one of my companions named Tuku called me and told me that he and some other men are planning to leave my old company because they did not get any salary. I gave him some advice about MOM. After that, another man called me; five men from that company called me that day. None of them knew where MOM was or how to go there. Some of them hadn't received any salary for three or five months. Everybody has a family so they left the company.

28 July 2011

Today is Saturday and all the men came out from my old company. They didn't know MOM is not open on Saturday. They were afraid of being caught because they left the company and needed to wait till Monday. If their boss had reported to the police that they had run away, they could be caught for being illegal. I reassured them that there is no need to be scared; that the boss could not do anything. Even then they were afraid. They didn't know anything about the law. I took them to see a volunteer from TWC2 because they were so scared. The volunteer sent an email to the MOM, taking the name and permit number of those eight guys. After that, they were less scared, but the problem was where to stay till Monday.

Monday came and it was time for them to go to MOM. On Sunday, they all insisted that I go with them because they didn't know about MOM, so I did. I told them to take a token for the blue lobby. I told the first guy to tell the officer that the eight of them are together. Two officers were waiting for them because of the volunteer's email. The two officers took them to the green lobby and listened to the case. Their complaint was all about their salary and their living place. They also complained about the cooking facilities and the bathroom. Put simply, all the basic needs of a human being. You see, our boss had them sleep inside the workshop and it was very hot.

After listening, the officer referred the case to the senior officer and the officer said they could only deal with the salary dispute here. For other matters, they would have to go to the Kim Seng Rd MOM. There they could talk about their other problems. The two officers asked them to come back one week later, but by that time, the boss had cut their work permits.

I reminded them that they had spent a lot of money to come to Singapore. Some had only been with that company for three or four months. If they were to go back then, their family would lose. I told them to talk about that when they went to Kim Seng Rd. They pleaded for a way to stay.

The Havelock MOM called them for a meeting with the boss about the salary. But the problem was that the boss showed a lower amount than what the men should get. The meeting ended without a resolution, but the MOM officer agreed that the boss invite the men to his office the next day and calculate exactly the amount they were owed.

When they reached the office the next day, the boss confined them all with the help of gangsters. Nobody could go out and they beat the first guy who entered the room. After beating him, they caught the second guy, Fazul, and beat him severely. My friend Tuku escaped the office and called the police. Within a few minutes, the police were there. Hearing everything, the police gave them a blue card to show that the case was recorded. The first two men had to be admitted to Novena hospital because of the beating. The next day, they filed a case at the Outram Park police station against the boss for beating

them. Their salary and other cases were continuing at MOM. Some of my friends were able to continue working with TJS companies.

3 August 2011

Today I attended a seminar in Little India. There I met two Bangladeshi brothers who informed us about safe migration and I learned so many things from them. The first part was about making the proper decision with the family members, relatives and friends and evaluating whether you need to go or not. We should consider the problems of the family, the security, health, education of the children, the property and the family's land.

The second part was about registering your name at the nearest district manpower office, making the passport in the proper way, deciding on a registered recruitment agency, acquiring the skills for the particular job, calculating the gain and loss, collecting money for the migration, having the papers checked by an NGO, and getting an introduction to the language and culture of the receiving country.

The third part was about the briefing from BMET, getting the visa, passport, air ticket, medical clearance, and immigration clearance. The contract and other necessary papers should be photocopied and kept by someone else as well as by oneself. We should open a bank account in our own name and another in the family's name for their expenses and keep important numbers of organisations like MOM and the NGOs.

The fourth part was about registering our names at the High Comm and finding out the address of the working place, respecting the rules and regulations of the country, being responsible at work, maintaining self-respect. If somebody becomes affected by the company breaking the law or breaking the contract, we must seek the help of the embassy and the courts.

The fifth part was about staying in contact with the family and restraining oneself and not engaging in illegal or threatening behavior. The sixth part was about sending money home through a legal banking channel and developing the mentality of saving money and making a plan for the family's future. Migrants work for the development of both countries and should be respected representatives of their own country.

Suggestions for Migrant Workers from the Talk:

Can avail the High Comm support

Buying of the government plot

In case of accident or illness can return to home country at the expense of the company

Can get the compensation in case of accident or death

Anyway, I have learned so many things about safe migration. But I'm confused about what was said in the fourth part, that if we have a difficult situation we have to inform the High Comm. In my case, I went to the High Comm, but they are so irresponsible it cannot be expressed in words. Not only me, it's the same with everybody who goes to the High Comm. They never care for us at all. They were so irresponsible they might as well not even be in Singapore. After sitting for three hours they gave me a letter and told me to show it to MOM. I did so, but MOM never took any notice of it. So what does the Bangladesh High Comm do for me? Nothing. Whatever I needed to do I did by myself going to MOM.

The High Comm causes many problems in Singapore because there are no proper rules and regulations. There is no pressure from the High Comm on the Singapore government and that is why the companies use us as they will. If we look at the Indian and Thai Embassies, we might ask how it's possible that our own High Comm is like this? The Thai and Indian workers have fewer problems because their embassies made some rules and regulations for the [Singapore] government. Anyway, if our High

Comm would look after us just a little, then I think there would be fewer problems. We migrant workers must be made aware. If the boss doesn't give the salary, there is no way but to go to MOM and complain. Suppose I want to inform the court, I can't because it is an expensive system that is very complicated and requires the help of a lawyer. It is difficult to hire a lawyer as a migrant worker because our financial condition is so bad. No matter what the result, you still have to pay. So to win back my SGD5,000, it might take SGD 6,000.

If the High Comm were to take the necessary steps regarding this then there would be no problem. Suppose the High Comm insisted that the company needs to pay workers through the bank, then I think there would be no salary dispute. If the High Comm puts pressure on the Singapore government, we would be saved from some of these problems. It's very difficult for workers like us to get justice.

Workers need the freedom to stay in Singapore. If someone is confined or their movement is curtailed, it is a crime, but employers, being scared of losing the SGD5,000 security bond, confine workers against their will and hire gangsters for repatriation. Workers' passports are also taken by the employer. That's why the movement of the worker becomes restricted. But I believe we should hold our own passports. Why does our employer take our passports? There is no law that says the employer can take our passports. To me, it is not legal, and our rights are violated. Our travel documents should be with us. I have told this to MOM and the officer said, 'You must take your passport. Why did you give it to your employer? Your employer has no right to keep it.' So, if we don't know that, we ourselves are the problem. If our passports are with us, then we are free to move and our experience will be improved.

Final Reflection

There are three big problems in Singapore with the Special Pass: the resting place, food and no job. The main needs for me are food, clothing and shelter. When a man goes on the Special Pass, it is a big problem because of the lack of these basic things. The other big problem for me is no job. When I have a Special Pass, my family has more pain than me because they are depending on me. At the end of the month, I should send them money, and they hoped and waited. When I got a Special Pass, I didn't have permission to work, so I couldn't earn money to help my family. With the Special Pass, I have to remain in Singapore for a long time like this. I cannot do work or help the family. My biggest problem is no permission to work. Please, everyone note that if we could work on the Special Pass, it would be better for us. If MOM would take some steps to allow us to work on the Special Pass, I would be very happy.

No members of my family knew about my situation in Singapore. I feel ashamed that I have come to Singapore four times and got nothing. If I let my family know, it would be difficult and painful for them, because every time it is the same problem for them.

I had a plan when I went home to Bangladesh to start a business. Nowadays, the most common businesses for men like me are RMG (ready-made garments) and shrimp farming. In our area, we have a lot of shrimp farming. My father has a small shrimp farm, but due to lack of money, the business isn't running well. I have a dream of starting this business if I have the money. I also have a plan to do some other business using the profits from the shrimp farming, like opening a grocery store, selling meat, breeding fish, cultivating padi, and operating a petrol pump. I think with the grace of Allah and prayers, I can do everything.

Chapter Six

Shafiq

To earn money for medical costs for his second son, handicapped and unable to walk, Shafiq came to Singapore to work as a welder in a shipyard. After a fall in the ship's hold in September 2008 that fractured his pelvis, the company attempted to detain Shafiq to prevent him from lodging an injury claim. He managed to avoid repatriation, but had no money for his medical expenses, food or lodging while on a Special Pass. Another blow came when he was jailed for being unable to pay a SGD400 fine for dropping a cigarette butt. He was allowed to remain in Singapore to collect his work injury compensation, but was prevented from returning again to work.

Shafiq used his compensation money to buy a small piece of land and build a house in Bangladesh. He borrowed money to buy a small scooter in order to earn a living taxiing people, but his wife insisted that he quit this job after being robbed twice at gunpoint. Another migration attempt took him to Iraq, where he worked for six months without receiving any salary. Now he struggles to provide for his family with a small shop selling notebooks, soap and simple household supplies near his home.

My name is Shafiq. My late father's name is Eyad Ali. I was born in Bangladesh, the district is Faridpur, the police station is Noriya. I came to old Dhaka in a rented house after the river destroyed my home. I was born to a poor family. I was the youngest among my brothers and sisters.

In such a poor family, my big brothers and sisters did not get a high education. They wanted to make me as highly educated as possible. From that love and affection, one of my brothers admitted me at Shampur Govt. Primary School in Dhaka but in the middle of my high school, I could not continue. My brother told me they have no ability to continue my education. He also told me it's better that I learn some good work, by which to make my future strong. With that in mind, I went to Bismillah Engineering Workshop. I worked there making windows and gates and such with no salary for two years.

With that experience, I found work in another shop for BDT800 per month. While working there, I realized that the owner had problems paying salaries at the end of the month. The workshop owner collected only 20–30 per cent from his clients, with the remaining 80 per cent unpaid. If the owner demands payment, he can't get work orders from the clients. In this way, if a workshop owner serves ten to fifteen clients, with such a loss of capital, he'll lose his business. His clients had a hard time paying even that small amount that they owed him.

After seeing that situation, I promised myself that I would never be a shop owner. In that way I was working. In 1991, I married my sweetheart. Once married, I got a heavy economic problem. After paying the house rent, I could barely maintain my family with my little salary.

After a year and a half, my first child, Raihan, was born. Then my economic problems got worse. My child didn't drink his mother's milk, so we had to feed him powdered milk. One day, I saw that my child was fed rice water instead of powdered milk. After seeing that, I got more pain. Inwardly, I was disgusted with myself because I'm a man who can't even take care of his dear wife and little child. I couldn't raise my little baby properly. I decided that I have to find a way to take care of my family.

There were other workshops near my working place, so I informed some of the owners that I need extra work to earn enough money to maintain my family properly. Most of them agreed to give me part-time work. My boss also agreed to give me part-time work. So after finishing my regular hours, I put in extra hours and worked till midnight. Then the family was running well.

In 1997, my second child, Rahat, was born. The birth was difficult and his physical condition was not good. The doctor gave us basic information about Rahat's condition, saying that he would never walk or run normally. After some medical tests, the doctor informed us that the lower part of his body, from his waist to his feet, is totally powerless. The doctor also said that the emergency delivery in the seventh month of pregnancy was due to this problem. Although Rahat was never expected to walk normally, with physical therapy, there was a small chance that his condition could improve.

After hearing that, I became crazy. What to do now? He looked like such a sweet baby with a normal body, but I couldn't bear to think that he'd never run or walk. Where and how to treat my child? I couldn't stop thinking about doctors, hospitals and therapy. The therapy centre didn't help his condition and it worsened my economic problems.

In 1999, I was about to start a new part-time job, and I thought again about opening my own workshop. That was a turning point for me. I asked for economic help from my nearest friends. They helped me as much as they could. My mother also dug into her small fund to help me. That way I got a little capital to open a workshop, drawing on my past experience.

The whole year I was making a good profit from my work at that workshop. But I spent so much money for Rahat's operation and physiotherapy and yet none of it made any difference for him.

In 2005, the price of tools for the workshop was going up, things like planers, angles, jet bars, flat bars, etc. The price of raw materials also impacted the workshop business. So I had to shut the workshop down in 2006, and my family's suffering began again.

Since I know how to drive a car, I managed to get a taxi to drive. I provided for my family for a short while, but soon was back where I started. Hearing about my dismal situation, my brother Aziz called me from Singapore to say that since I had worked as a welder for a long time, I should be able to find work in a Singapore shipyard. There was a demand for welders and he asked me to try for a job as a welder.

Aziz told me I'd need BDT300,000 to come to Singapore and suggested I borrow what I could from relatives and he'll make up the rest. I dreamed about that idea and finally managed some money from my relatives and a loan of BDT150,000, with interest. Then Aziz helped me to come to Singapore after I passed the welding test and obtained a visa from Hi-Asia Engineering Pte Ltd in October 2006.

After landing at Changi Airport at 4:00am, I was greeted with lights shining brightly in the middle of the night. I walked on beautiful clean walkways covered with expensive carpets. I waited there. I waited for daylight at the immigration checkpoint.

By 8:00am, nobody had come to receive me from the airport. I was so hungry my stomach was giving me pain, but I had no Singapore money to buy food. Finally, at 9.30am, one Indian gentleman came to receive me. He had a lorry outside waiting to take me somewhere in Serangoon for a medical checkup. From there, I went to the Hi-Asia Engineering Pte Ltd office at 1, Yishun St 23, #06-33. At the welding training centre, I was introduced to two Bangladeshi trainers named Khokon and Sahidul. From that moment, I was engaged as a 6G welder till 7pm. For lunch, I received a food packet. That day I met my boss, Daljit Singh.

The boss told Khokon and Sahidul to arrange the dormitory and meals for me. He gave me an advance of SGD100 and told me to buy something for cooking. This was later cut from my salary. That evening, I went with Khokon and Sahidul by lorry to the workers' dormitory at Jurong East, Toh Guan Road. I was assigned an upper bed in a bunk bed.

After completing the formalities, I went to Sembawang shipyard to start work. I received personal protective equipment that I'd never seen before. That safety equipment turned out to be very useful for me.

In the company contract, there's no job listing for welders, so I had to work as a pipefitter, a signalman, and several other jobs alongside men with a variety of skills.

At the end of the month, when I received my salary, I found that it was SGD16 a day. Before starting work, I understood my basic salary to be SGD20 a day. When I brought this up to the site manager, Harpal Singh, he explained that although I had come as a welder, I didn't have a skills certificate. In order to increase my salary, I would need to get that certificate. I asked to be given a welding test as soon as possible.

Where I worked, there were 14 Bangladeshis among the 200 workers. After working only six months, I was considered by everyone to be a good friend, a brother, a trustworthy man. The boss, manager, supervisor, foreman and co-workers liked and appreciated me because I never made excuses to avoid work and I always worked safely. My work progress was good.

After eight months, I passed the 6G welding test together with 15 workers, and my salary scale was raised to SGD20 a day from SGD16 a day. That's when I started working as a welder in my company. The foreman and supervisor were impressed with my working progress. Their appreciation was so deep that one Saturday evening, I noticed that my name did not appear on the following day's list of workers. Many others were listed for duty but not me. I was surprised, because for the last one and a half years, I had no break from work, not even on Sunday. I called my supervisor to make sure. He was angry and told me, 'What? You have no work tomorrow? Hang on while I check.'

After one hour, the boss phoned me back, and said very quietly, '*Sahab*, you've been working for many days without a break, so tomorrow, you should take a rest. From Monday, you'll be in a fresh

condition to work.' I missed my double pay that day, but I was happy with what the boss said and thanked him.

In Singapore, my work permit was good for two years. I was impressed seeing this country, and felt my work was appreciated. I had come with many hopes and dreams but not sure if I could realize those dreams. The company deducted SGD50 for house rent, and together with the other deductions for food and other charges, the deductions added up to SGD200 per month. That was money I needed to send home to my family. My wife was having difficulty maintaining the family while paying for the children's schooling, the house rent, and the interest on my loan. Until now, many years later, I haven't been able to repay that loan.

Sometimes, my wife would tell me on the phone that she can't manage our family and the creditors anymore. I would try to console her, telling her to be patient for a few more days. *Insha'Allah* everything will be right. When my first two years was finished, I had to pay another amount to renew the work permit. I didn't know anything about that.

The darkest day of my life was 20 days after the new contract. That was a rainy day, 15 September 2008. From morning it was raining. At 6am, I went to Sembawang shipyard, probably the oil shipyard named Shalimar, to repair a pipe at the mid-level of the ship, about three metres from the deck. At about 9.30am, after finishing the work, I told the fitter man to be ready for welding when I return from the toilet with drinking water.

It was still drizzling. I had a water bottle in my hand when I slipped on the first step. I was injured on the left side of my stomach, on my right leg, and my finger. I could not stand. Some workers came to help me. Hearing of the accident, the foreman came to take me out. The others prevented him from doing that, explaining that the safety supervisor must be present. When the safety supervisor came and saw my condition, he called for an ambulance. I was removed from the ship by crane and taken to the first aid office. My clothes were cut off for primary treatment, and I was then taken to West Point Hospital. They kept me at the hospital for only three or four hours, and from there I was sent to the supervisor's house in Sembawang. I'd never been to that house before.

In the afternoon, the site manager, Harpal Singh, came to see me and returned my wallet and my mobile. I saw that my work permit was not there and questioned Mr Singh. He answered that because I was not well, I had no need to go outside, and the permit would be returned to me when I needed it. He said that no one in the dormitory would be able to care for me, but that people would be around to tend to me at this house.

Someone at that house later informed me that the doctor had given me only two days medical leave in spite of the seriousness of the injury. I said I didn't know about that because all the hospital documents were taken from me. After that, he kept silent, and I reflected on the meaning of that silence. One senior supervisor was stationed in the room to guard me. When he went out the next day, I talked to one of the other men there. He recommended that I contact a law firm about the accident and gave me the number of the Bengali legal assistant. He warned me that after the medical leave, the company might send me home, thus depriving me of my right to medical treatment. He suggested that I lodge an injury compensation claim so that I'd receive proper treatment and compensation.

I didn't know who to trust. People kept watch on me the whole time and I couldn't even get out of bed. The supervisor was around almost all the time, but if I go out, how would I manage my food and medical treatment?

Without thinking, I struggled to get up and inched forward leaning against the wall. I thought the door might be locked because no one was with me at the time. The door was unlocked and I couldn't see anyone standing watch. I ran out of the house like I was being chased by a mad dog.

That afternoon, I made my way to K. Ravi Law and met Mr Ranjit, who told me I'd come to the right place. He told me that to make a claim, I would need medical documents and a minimum of 14 days medical leave. He told me to go to a government hospital for treatment, and come back to him with the papers. After that, he would take the necessary information.

I told him that I can do those things, but after leaving the supervisor's house, many of the company's staff have been calling me and I'm afraid to answer the phone. I don't know where to stay, how to get treatment, or who will provide food. Mr Ranjit said he can't help with those things, I'd have to manage those things on my own. When I heard that I was shocked. Everything looked dark for me.

I left Ranjit's office and went to see a relative, Mazid, to stay with him for the night and borrowed money from him. The next day, at Alexandra Hospital, the receptionist insisted on seeing my work permit before allowing me to see the doctor. I could only show them my welding pass, which had my permit number, and asked if that would be enough. The doctor agreed to see me for a SGD70 emergency fee.

The doctor gave me a complete check-up and took X-rays. He gave me two injections and put me on a saline drip, keeping me for several hours under observation. I was released with a prescription to last five days, and instructions to return after that. With the documents from Alexandra Hospital, the law firm had the information to lodge a claim. I found a bed in a house near Mustafa Centre at a cost of SGD120 per month.

At the next visit, the doctor performed another physical examination, looked at the computer records, issued another 21 days medical leave, and advised physiotherapy three days each week. I knew the cost of the physiotherapy and knew I couldn't afford it. When I asked the boss to pay for the treatment, he told me that because I had taken legal action against the company, I had to pay myself. If the case is accepted, then they would pay. I had to borrow from friends to support myself. But when my wife wrote me about the family's situation, I could only cry.

The Ministry of Manpower scheduled an interview 18 days after I lodged the claim. At 8am, the investigating officer, the interpreter and I met in a closed room. After 40 minutes, I was asked to sign a witness paper saying that I understand that I will receive punishment if I knowingly make a false claim. I told the officer that not a single word of my statement is false. He wanted to see my permit, but I said that the company took my permit after the accident and wouldn't return it to me. The officer asked how I was able to stay outside without a permit, since the police can arrest anyone without a valid permit. I answered that it was my good luck not to fall in the path of the police. The MOM officer told me to have the lawyer contact the employer to return the permit. The boss denied taking the permit, saying that I must have lost it. The employer should then have gone to the Ministry with my passport to apply for a new permit, but because they took no responsibility for losing it, my lawyer told me to make a police report declaring that I'd lost it. With the police report, I'd be able to get a Special Pass if the boss appears with my passport.

Finally, with a Special Pass, I was legal again, but I still had the problem of paying the house rent. I could only pay for half a month and then had to leave to stay on the street. Mr Ranjit treats his clients rudely, so I changed law firms to avoid his misbehavior.

Through one of my friends, I came to know about The Cuff Road Project [TWC2's free meals program]. I met another man, Khayer, there. He'd been sleeping outside after MOM threw out his salary claim and he invited me to stay in the park with him. With no other options, I followed Khayer to his spot in Kallang Park.

The benches in the park are 4.5 feet long. I'm about 5.5 feet tall so I had to bend my body to 4.5 feet to fit on the bench. It was so painful to stay even a single night like that. Nobody would understand that without experiencing it himself. I survived in various parks like that for a while, taking one free meal a day, and starving the rest of the time.

Now, back in Bangladesh, I have a little provision shop near my house. Somehow, I can survive and maintain my family. I want to give thanks to Allah for my present situation. And a special thanks to everyone who helped me to survive during my bad times and continue to help me to achieve my goal.

Chapter Seven

Abu

Abu was 31 years old when he arrived in Singapore in June 2010 to work for a construction firm. He was promised SGD24 per day, as his IPA stated, but was only given SGD16 per day. Because of Abu's excellent English, the company soon gave him a desk job as a logistics officer and promised to convert his Work Permit to an S-Pass, which would mean a higher salary of SGD2,400 per month and better conditions. Abu was asked to attend a course, which the company promised to reimburse him for later. But neither the reimbursement, nor the promised S-Pass, nor his full salary, was forthcoming, and Abu decided to depart the company in early 2012.

He was placed on a Special Pass and granted a few months of TJS work to recover some of his owed salary of around SGD7,000 until his repatriation in December 2012. During this period, his father suffered a stroke, and so Abu hid his situation from his family, so as to spare his father further distress. Abu returned home with no savings and unable to repay all his migration debts. His narrative focuses primarily on his experience of return to Bangladesh as the only son in his family in the aftermath of failed migration.

My name is Abu. I'm from Garjana village, Satoria Thana, in the Manikganj district. I'm 34 years old now, but when I went to Singapore in 2010 to work as a general worker, my age was 29. My company was called Scan-Bilt Pte Ltd. My company's main office was near Balestier Road, but I worked on an island named Pulau Bukom. I went to Singapore in June 2010 with 15 other Bangladeshi workers. As I could speak English, the company selected me to be the group leader. Whenever any newcomers needed to talk to the company supervisor or the boss, they came to me and I would translate what they said into English. That's why the workers loved me very much. I stood beside them whenever they faced any problems. But I was made to suffer a lot for that love and affection, because the company thought since they couldn't understand English, I might be able to influence the workers in a way that would be of benefit to the company.

My Bangladeshi agent, Mr Rana, who was known to my family, told me that I could get a good job in Singapore. He said I would earn roughly SGD1,000 dollars per month and my job would be in an office. That's why I agreed to go to Singapore. With considerable struggle, I managed to borrow SGD8,600 from the moneylender, as well as some of my relatives by promising I would repay the money within six months. I calculated that I could return the money within six months as I expected to be earning SGD1,000 a month. But after working for one and a half years, I found that it was quite impossible to pay back my debt money even if I stayed one year. I became very frustrated.

From the very beginning, I was reluctant to do the job when I arrived because it was not the same job that was stated in my IPA. In my IPA, my job was listed as process worker. Previously, I didn't know anything about the Singapore IPA. I blindly believed the local agent's promises. But after I got to Singapore, I had to do all sorts of work: excavation, casting, bar bending, fencing soil, carpeting the road etc. These are all jobs I'd never done before when I was in my country. I have two sisters and no brother. I'm the youngest. My two sisters are married already. As the youngest son, I was loved most by my parents. I studied for a BA (Hons) in English Literature but had to drop out before completion because of financial problems. I was helping my father at his pharmacy part-time. I was not under pressure to maintain the family.

There was a site manager in my company named Mr Azmi Atan who liked me very much. I spoke to him about my distress and hard work. He talked to my bosses and I was given a desk job as a logistics officer after roughly one year. After that, I talked to my boss, Mr Chan Wah Soon, about my salary, and he told me to wait. He promised to increase my salary, but when I finally spoke to him again about my salary, he shouted at me in front of all the office staff and said, 'Last time you were a *chankul* man [who excavates soil], now you've become very big? I've raised your position, gave you a seat in an aircon room. You all Bangladeshis are the same, stupid!' He also threatened to send me back to my home country the same day. I was afraid of his outburst. I couldn't believe my ears that he can shout at me in such a way without any cause. Previously, the company had sent me for a supervisor's safety course and told me to pay the course fees myself; they promised the fees would be reimbursed with the following month's salary. After I passed, the company never appointed me safety officer and didn't give my training fees back.

Up till then, I couldn't finish repaying my debt in Bangladesh. I thought, if the company sends me back, then what would happen? So I made a rapid decision to run away from the company. I told a friend about my situation and the next day I went to MOM and filed a case. I was given a Special Pass from MOM and found a place to stay at a local NGO space. I was so lucky to be able to stay there, because most workers on a Special Pass had to live in open spaces like parks, MRT stations, the barren sheds of some shops, car parks etc. From there, I got to know about the Cuff Road free food project (TCRP). I ate the free food and I survived.

My family suffered a lot while I was on a Special Pass. Unfortunately, my father had an accident and became paralyzed and couldn't walk. My parents had to depend on me financially. The moneylenders were constantly asking for money over and over again. It was a great burden for me and my family to

bear. Many Special Pass workers were working illegally, but I was scared of being caught by the authorities and I was warned against it, so I didn't.

MOM gave me a chance to find a job under TJS. I found a job but after three months I left the job as it was very hard for me to do because of the physical demands. After around six months, my case was settled and I returned home empty-handed. There was a lot on my mind when I came back. What would I do in the future since I had no money with me? How could I pay the moneylenders? How would I manage the treatment of my father? Above all, how could I maintain my family?

On 17 December 2012, I returned to Bangladesh. My sister and brother-in-law were present at the airport to receive me. They were happy to see me but I was not, because I knew what was waiting for me. At night, I reached my house, and after seeing my parents, I cried a lot. My father embraced me and gave me consolation. The next morning, many people came to visit me. I was pretending and hid my feelings by smiling. People were talking to each other about my earnings. Two days later, the ladies who lent me money at an interest rate of 12 per cent came. Both of them were quarrelsome by nature. At first, they asked about my condition, but before leaving, they asked for their money back. I said I'd give it back shortly. Another day, the ladies returned and started shouting at me publicly. One of the ladies called me a cheat, a liar. I requested that she give me some more time but she scolded me by cursing my parents' name. There was a huge gathering and people were laughing at me. I was dying of shame. My father was also ashamed and feeling sick. Since then, I would hide myself inside my room; most of the time, I stayed away from my village to look for a job. What was my dream before going to Singapore and what have I gained? It seems that if I had never gone to Singapore, then my life would not be like that.

People believed I had brought a lot of money back from Singapore, so if I went to the village market they asked me to buy them tea, cigarettes etc. Some people asked about getting a visa. My relatives were coming again and again to my house to ask for the money they loaned but I couldn't return it. Day by day, my family relations and reputation was going down. Previously, we had no money and nobody asked me for any, not personally or at the shops, now people think that I have money but I am not giving them any. One day, my mother asked me about the debt money and I told her what happened. She was very shocked. I didn't tell anything to my father because I was worried about his health. In my village, my family is known for upholding truthfulness and justice. My grandfather was a very famous person. People were saying bad things about me, that I had been spoiled after going to Singapore. They were spreading rumours that I had earned a lot of money but had spent it in a bad way on 'foreign ladies'. I was very upset by that. But I know myself well so I didn't fight or argue with them. During that time, I couldn't even mix with my close friends out of shame.

In Bangladesh, the age limit for government jobs is 30, and for freedom fighters, it is 32. My father is a freedom fighter, but I couldn't find a job for the lack of money. Now, my age has exceeded the limit to apply for a government job. I'd dropped out from the third year of my honours. If I want to continue again, I also need money. Right now, I am overwhelmed with suffering. I have to buy my father's medicines, and maintain my family. I'm still unmarried. My mother has also become old and her health is not so good. My parents want to see me married before their death. I know my ability. So I refused them because if I marry now how would I manage my conjugal life? In the meantime, I've gone to so many places, but because of my age and inability to pay bribe money, I haven't got a job. I tried to teach some students, but eventually quit as they didn't pay my tuition fees properly. With some of my friends, I had started a small business, but that failed because of one stupid guy. We were four partners but that guy ruined all of us and spoiled the money because he misspent the profits and used much of the money for his own private purposes, rather than the business.

I'm in Bangladesh now but I have a connection with some of my friends in Singapore through email and phone calls. I took on some part-time work as a translator and received a reasonable salary. With the salary, I repaid some of my debt to the moneylenders and expanded my existing house with an attached bathroom for my sick father. Still, I'm unemployed and there is no steady source of income. I'm

maintaining my family with much struggle. It's a great burden on me and sometimes I can hardly bear it. I can't sleep well at night. When I recall my past I become crazy. There is darkness ahead in my life. Still, I have a dream to start a children's school adjacent to my home. I have only 1.5 decimal of land left. If I had much money then I would educate the street and needy children there for free.

When my father was well, there was a lot of peace and happiness in my family. Now, both my parents are aged and I'm not able to look after them properly. It's a matter of much pain for me. Now, nobody trusts me or is willing to lend me money anymore to set up a business as I failed to repay the money of others.

Before going to Singapore, the people of my village saw me as a pious person. Now, I have lost everything — time, money, faith, love and affection. The closest persons are going far away from me. Mentally, I have become sicker day by day, and am losing hope about regaining my golden days.

I fervently request that persons who want to go to Singapore to work take heed from my real life story. Before leaving their country, they must understand everything about going abroad and not be duped.

Chapter Eight

Hossain

Hossain is 21 years old, from Comilla in Bangladesh. He came to Singapore in June 2013 to work as a cleaner, although the company employing him was a landscaping company. Hossain paid SGD10,500 in fees back in Bangladesh to work in Singapore, believing that he would be working for a good company and earning SGD1,200 per month. Upon arrival, he was told that his salary would be SGD500 per month with no overtime and no days off, and that he would sleep in the bin centre of a HDB block in Clementi with seven other Bangladeshi men. He cried as he despaired about what to do.

His situation came to the attention of MOM and he was put on a Special Pass, but he was unable to find a temporary job after nine months of searching. Hossain was forced to take on illegal work to meet his debt repayments and support his family and was caught by the police and deported. He left Singapore in September 2014 with his debt unpaid, and was blacklisted for a year from returning to Singapore because of the illegal work.

He has a young wife, whom he married months prior to migrating to Singapore. Saddam received SGD1,000 from TWC2's Suitcase Fund to ease the burden of his failed migration. He used the money to pay a bribe to gain a job in a cosmetics factory in Dhaka, where he now works. The salary covers his daily living costs but is not enough to repay his migration debt. His case was presented to MOM as one of human trafficking, but he received neither recognition as a victim nor accompanying supports. He was vilified for working illegally whilst on a Special Pass.

My name is Hossain. I'm 21 years old and the son of a middle-class family. As a child I began to understand everything; I saw that my father earned a small amount of money from agricultural work with which my family could somehow be maintained. Out of that, my father had to provide my educational expenses. We are three brothers. I'm the middle.

When I was in Grade 4, my mother became very sick with a heart problem. On the one hand, my mother was sick and she had to see doctor; on the other hand, the educational expenses of me and my brothers had to be provided for. How could Father bear this burden alone? Each month we spent BDT6,000–7,000 for mother's cardiac medicine. My grandfather and grandmother were aged persons and my father also had to look after them. My family was surviving with great difficulty. Father became sick in this situation and my family carried on in acute need.

Nonetheless, my two brothers and I had to continue our studies. Because of the worsening situation of the family, my elder brother stopped studying and began looking for work. My elder brother had passed Grade 10 by then. For the lack of money, he couldn't get admitted in higher secondary school. There was no other option. Mother's medicine costs had to be paid each month. After much searching, my elder brother finally found a job that paid BDT7,000 each month.

With that money, we bought Mother's medicine and started Father's treatment. Father slowly recovered. My younger brother and I continued our studies with great difficulty. One day, Father said he could no longer work. He wondered how our elder brother could support us all on his meager income. I was studying in Grade 7 then. Father said I must give up studying, but with much effort and by taking some tutoring work to earn extra money, I continued school.

Whilst all of this was going on, one of the female class juniors in my area was introduced to me. She became a partner of my sorrow and happiness. Most of the time she gave me good advice. She told me not to give up my studies no matter what trials and difficulties my family faced. She was also doing part-time tutoring and often gave me her teaching money. If I refused to take it, she would tell me to keep the money and return it later when I get paid for my tuition. When I got my teaching money and wanted to repay her, she told me to keep it, that she will ask for it when she needed it.

As the days passed, she became close to me. But I didn't pursue her because the urgency of my family's financial problems remained. My elder brother passed the SSC, but couldn't finance his studies after that, so he worked to support us all. Mother's medical needs continued, which put even more strain on the family. I was constantly stressed thinking of how my brother and I would continue our education.

My school was three kilometres away from my house, and every day I had to walk to and from school. I also had to tend my father's farmland. So one day my father told me not to continue my schooling because of the family's poverty. I refused to stop my education, always hoping that by any means, I would accomplish my goals one day. The *Eid* came and people wore nice clothes. I also wished to wear nice clothes but I couldn't afford them. I thought that one day when I achieved my goals I would also wear those fine clothes on *Eid*.

In the Qur'an I read that if a person suffers, he will gain happiness one day. Wishing that, I continued to wait. My friends could all do whatever they wanted with no financial constraint. I struggled to pass the SSC and gained entry to college. But I would need around BDT40,000. From where could I get such money? I couldn't ask my parents as the family was in need, so I fell into despair. I failed to raise the money and so couldn't get admitted. My elder brother got married because someone was needed in the house to look after Mother. But his wife meant another mouth to feed, and we couldn't even feed ourselves. With tutoring and doing a part-time job, I helped maintain my family. In that way, one year passed.

The time for my admission to college had come again, so I had another interview and passed for the second time. Then, from the money I had saved, I was admitted into a Diploma of Engineering and had to board at a house in Dhaka. But each semester required another BDT40,000. My parents,

grandfather, grandmother and my younger brother's expenses were borne by my elder brother while I had to lead my life in poverty. I came home once a month to see my parents. The boarding house owner threatened to kick me out whenever I failed to pay the rent on time. Poverty always seemed to pull me from behind. It seemed I would never have the education I needed to find a good job. Every day, every moment, I contemplated the way need dominated my life.

It always seemed to me that my mother was sick, whether she had taken her medicine properly or not. The semester fees and house rent were due again. If I failed to pay the semester fees, I couldn't sit for the examination. I didn't mix with my friends due to the lack of money, because to spend time with friends I'd need money.

All the time, I thought about my studies, about my parents, and how I could better my family. Poverty and illness accompanied us everywhere, and it seemed we'd never overcome this. Sometimes I wanted to commit suicide. But suicide is a great sin, so I didn't do it. I thought constantly about how I was born to suffer from pain and poverty. BDT7,000 each month was needed for mother's medicine. We also needed money for my younger brother's education. My part-time job had gone. How could I pay my semester fees? How could I pay my house rent? I had no choice to ask my family for money for my education. But Father said there was no need to continue studying. In spite of that, my mother had a dream that I would study engineering.

Without informing Father, my mother gave me money to pay the semester fees. I didn't ask her where she got the money. Soon after that she was sick again. I hurried home and took her to see the doctor. After completing some tests, the doctor said that Mother hadn't taken her medicine for many days. I brought Mother home and asked her if she hadn't taken her medicine. She began to cry and said, 'I don't have medicine because I haven't any money. I gave it to you. My dream was that you would become great by studying engineering. You had no money, and couldn't pay the semester fees so I gave you my medicine money.'

When I was close to finishing my fourth semester, my elder brother said he could no longer help the family and his wife insisted that the two of them move out of my father's home to their own house. So my elder brother and his wife left us. I promised myself that whatever happened, I would finish my engineering. Slowly, Father started to cultivate the lands and I helped him. But Father was old, so how much longer could he struggle? As much as possible, I helped my father.

After thousands of sufferings, I finished my engineering diploma and fulfilled my mother's dream. But to complete the full degree, I needed BDT20,00,000. At that point, I had to stop studying. Around that time, my father heard that people were being recruited to work in Singapore. Father thought everyone who went abroad to work earned a lot. Without telling me, my father decided I would go. I continued to plow my father's land after completing my studies.

One day, Father told me to make a passport because he was sending me abroad. I asked in which country and how could he do this. When he told me it was Singapore, I remembered I had heard before that Singapore is a country where dreams come true. Father said that one of my uncle's friends arranged for men to go to Singapore. Father didn't tell me how much money was needed, so I phoned my uncle in Singapore and asked him to find out. Five days later, my uncle called me and passed the phone to his friend. That man told me that to reach Singapore, I would need BDT720,000 for a job as a HDB block cleaner, for a salary of BDT40,000. I would not need to pay house rent, and after two years, the new contract would require no fee. I would work 12 hours a day, they told me. I told my uncle's friend I would let him know later.

After that phone call, the family was wondering how we could raise that huge amount of money. My father kept changing his mind, but finally he decided I should go. I argued that instead of going abroad, I would cultivate our land. The family was managing somehow, and it should be enough for us to get by. Father made me understand that by going abroad, I would earn a lot and could look after the

family, and have mother's illness treated. He said, 'Don't you want your mother and all of us to be comfortable and well off? Don't you want us to lead a life like other people?' I reluctantly agreed, but we still hadn't solved the problem of how to raise the money.

Father decided to mortgage our farmland for BDT400,000, but still it wasn't enough to cover the fees. There was a shortfall of BDT320,000. One of my friends gave me BDT120,000; Mother sold some gold for another BDT100,000. I borrowed the remainder of the money from a moneylender with interest. Finally, all the money was ready, but then the man who promised to lease Father's land backed out. The man in Singapore kept pressuring me for the money, but I couldn't see any way to raise it. I thought again of suicide. The man said he would only give BDT300,000 for the land, which left us BDT100,000 short. After much searching, we found a man who agreed to take the land for BDT400,000. The man in Singapore who arranged the job said to give the money to his brother. I handed over BDT400,000; the rest I would give after receiving the IPA.

My mother and father knew about my love affair and wanted me to marry the girl before I went to Singapore. I told them I would marry after coming back, but they wouldn't listen and forced me to marry. When my IPA was issued, I handed over the rest of my fee. My flight was on 6 April 2014. I left Bangladesh and came to Singapore, the land of dreams.

When I arrived at the airport in Singapore, it was 2pm, and still by 5pm nobody had come to collect me. I couldn't speak any English. Finally, my uncle's friend, Mizan, received me from the airport. He took me to a small building at Clementi Avenue 3 amid heavy rubbish. He introduced me to a Chinese man, explaining that he's my boss who will give me my work and salary, and I should do whatever he tells me to do. He took me to my sleeping quarters, which was a room in the bin centre, right next to the room where the rubbish was stored. I cried for many hours. The next day, that Chinese man instructed me to clean blocks 431-434. According to his instructions, I started cleaning.

After a few days, my work permit had come. I saw that in my permit, my job was supposed to be grass-cutting, but I was doing a cleaning job. I questioned my uncle's friend about this, 'Brother, in my permit, it is written grass-cutting. I shouldn't be doing this cleaning job.' He said, 'If you are working in Singapore, then it must be this cleaning job. Otherwise I will send you back to Bangladesh.' My family was in need and I had sold our land, so what would I do without this job? As I went to sleep at night in that garbage room, I wondered where the dream country of Singapore had gone.

I never imagined I would have to sleep in a place like that after spending so much money to get here. When I spoke to Father and Mother on the phone, I told them I was well and at peace. But I couldn't hide my feelings from my mother. She said, 'Why does it seem to me that you are not at peace. Are you lying to me?' I insisted again that I was happy.

After working the first month, I got my salary of SGD550. After that, I was not given my proper salary. For about four months, I was given no salary. From Bangladesh, Father and Mother said again and again, 'People have been pressuring us for money, so please send money soon.'

In Bangladesh, I had suffered from much poverty, and after coming here, I faced the same difficulty. My life was a struggle. I had no money for food. My roommate, Sajib, helped me by giving me money. Otherwise, I would have starved. Then, one day, Mizan came and told us all that we had to go to the grass-cutting company. He took us by car to a house behind Mustafa Centre where I worked in the grass-cutting company. My boss, the Chinese man, came and said something in English that we didn't understand. Mizan explained to us in Bengali, 'You need to go to MOM tomorrow. If they ask you whether any money was taken from you to bring you to Singapore, you should say no, no one took any money from you.'

Mizan said the boss would offer us free contracts and buy our air tickets to return to Singapore when we were sent back to Bangladesh. He also said our salary would be increased if we told the MOM what he wanted us to say. The next day, we went to MOM, but we told the truth. A few days later, we

received Special Passes. We sat idly for many days after that, and applied to many companies for a TJS job, but we were rejected each time. There appeared to be no way out. What would we eat, how could we pay the house rent? That's why I worked outside [illegally]. But my luck was very bad, and after working for only two days during those four months, MOM caught me and put me in jail for eight hours.

Coming out from jail, I again reflected on what to do. I applied for a company named TTJ and the work permit was issued. After completing the six-month permit, MOM called me in and said I had been banned for one year from working in Singapore, and that I needed to collect my air ticket and passport the following week. I hadn't even sent back half of what I had spent to come to Singapore. If I had to go back home, there would be no way but suicide.

Thank you for reading my story. Please pray for me and I will also pray for you.

Twelve Points of Advice for Migrant Workers

Number 1. Ask for receipts for all money paid out in Bangladesh and in Singapore. Keep the original and make copies for safekeeping.

Number 2. Get the full name, mobile #, FIN or WP # and signature of any person who accepts money from you or who makes agreements with you in Singapore. This does not indicate a lack of trust in that person.

Number 3. Read and understand before you sign your name on any document, including blank papers. If you are bullied into signing something you don't understand or aren't allowed to read, it usually means there is a problem.

Number 4. Beware of savings schemes and investment schemes. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Be cautious about accepting jobs or opportunities that you are told will make you rich quickly.

Number 5. Be aware that you may not be able to claim back any money from your company if it was deducted, withheld or unpaid more than one year previously, even if your employer tells you he is saving some of your salary for you. This includes part of your salary that your employer may say he is banking for you as savings for when you leave Singapore.

Number 6. Speak up to MOM when you spot unsafe or unfair practices at the workplace. You may do this in confidence without anyone revealing your name to your employer if you're afraid of losing your job.

Number 7. Take photographs of accident sites, witnesses, protective gear, machinery and equipment as soon as possible after an accident. This could be useful for injured workers.

Number 8. Make sure to get a discharge summary, medical certificates and other papers if you're hospitalized. You have a right to speak to the doctor without others being present if you wish.

Number 9. If you have legal representation, everything in your legal file belongs to you. Don't trust your lawyer or legal assistant if he doesn't give you access to your file, or if he charges you without giving an itemized statement of accounts and a receipt.

Number 10. Call the police immediately if you or someone else has been beaten or abused, or has been threatened with violence. This is important whether or not you make a complaint to MOM.

Number 11. Keep all records documenting your working hours, including salary slips and time cards. Keep a copy of any other documents you sign related to your working conditions, such as contracts or other agreements. Note that you should not be forced to sign any document that stipulates different and generally worse conditions to what you agreed in Bangladesh.

Number 12. If your company attempts to deport you from Singapore without your agreement, approach the Immigration officers at Changi Airport and tell them what has happened. They will bring you back to MOM to discuss your problem.

Six Interesting Facts about Singapore for Migrant Workers to Consider

1. It takes the average worker 17 months to pay off his debt for his first migration; if he becomes injured or the conditions change during his contract the debt might never be repaid.
<http://twc2.org.sg/2012/08/12/worse-off-for-working-kickbacks-intermediary-fees-and-migrant-construction-workers-in-singapore/>
2. Of the 140 salary dispute cases documented in Sallie Yea's research, and that are mediated by MOM, all but one claimant (migrant worker) received less than what they believed they were owed. More than three quarters of claimants received less than 50 per cent of what they believe they were owed (Sallie Yea's research).
3. In one study, men who are eligible for working on the TJS on average only find work for less than 30 per cent of the duration of their case (Sallie Yea 2015); many men do not manage to find a TJS job at all.
4. Repatriation companies are legally registered entities in Singapore and can be contracted by companies to deport migrant workers at any time. Some companies employ people to do this job, and these people are often referred to by migrant workers as 'gangsters' because of their violent methods.
5. On average, TCRP, which provides free meals to Special Pass holders from India and Bangladesh, see 150 new cases per month.
6. A company can terminate a worker at any time, even before his one or two years contract agreement is completed. The worker is not allowed to change employer in that situation but must return to his home country.
7. A worker may not receive surgical treatments unless the operation is deemed "immediately and medically necessary". Workers with less severe injuries may have to pay for their treatment themselves.

About the Editors

Debbie Fordyce is an executive committee member of Transient Workers Count Too, and the coordinator of The Cuff Road Project. She works with the Bangladeshi and Indian men who participate with the daily food programme and are unable to work while undergoing medical treatment or managing salary claims. She also manages the drop-in centre, the Dayspace, where migrants are invited to relax, feel secure, engage in musical, dramatic and literary pursuits, and find solace from demanding jobs and lengthy disputes with employers.

Rashedul Haque – RASHEDUL TO INSERT

Sallie Yea is currently Assistant Professor in Human Geography at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Her research has focused primarily on gender and migration, particularly vulnerable and failed migration, including trafficking. She has conducted ethnographic research with migrant entertainers in South Korea, and with men and women trafficked to Singapore. She recently edited a volume titled *Human Trafficking in Asia: Forcing Issues*, with Routledge. Her first monograph, *Trafficking Women in Korea*, was published with Routledge in 2015. She also volunteers for TWC2 providing assistance to men attempting to lodge labour-related complaints to MOM. In 2015 she commenced a new initiative called SAFE Migration, which builds on the work of the Diaries Project to help empower migrant workers.

Support Our Work

SAFE – This is a new initiative started in 2015 by Sallie Yea aimed at ensuring the safe migration of migrant workers, including the prevention of human trafficking and labour exploitation during their migrations. At present the initiative contains four projects:

Awareness-raising talks, materials and activities for intending and returned migrant workers conducted by returned workers in their home countries;

Support to seek economic justice for workers who have come home empty-handed after experiences of trafficking, labour exploitation and injury;

Migration's Kids, which provides modest funds to exploited workers so they may put their children back in school where they have had to drop out because of lack of money/ remittances;

Research to document the conditions that lead to unsafe and failed migration and human trafficking, and to explore the opportunities to prevent these conditions from emerging.

The Suitcase Fund

This is a fund started by several volunteers who felt the need for money to be given to men who are repatriated empty-handed. Whether injured early in their work and deemed ineligible for compensation, cheated of salary payments because of forged or forced signatures on salary slips, or terminated early by the employer, these men would be returning home before repaying the recruitment fees. So great is the sense of loss and shame that many of these men would rather die than return home empty-handed. We feel that giving them a small amount of money from the fund ensures that men do returned home, discouraged from thoughts of suicide.

We accept donations for this work. Funds raised from this book will also be used to support this work.

Photographs