

THIS **IS** EVIDENCE

RE-PICTURING SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANT MEN IN GREECE



**“THIS WILL LET THE PEOPLE
LEARN HOW WE LIVE
OUR LIVES HERE”**

(Undocumented Bangladeshi migrant worker, Manolada, Greece)

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This multi-media exhibition puts together South Asian migrant men's voices and testimonies, visual and oral, that they consider important to share with the larger world. All images and videos were taken either by the research collaborator, Reena Kukreja, at the behest of the men who pointed out what needed to be documented, or by the men themselves who would often take her camera or cell phone to click photos.

By centring migrant subjectivities, the exhibition gives migrant men from Bangladesh and Pakistan a medium to present themselves unmediated and

directly to diverse sets of audiences. They recognise all other avenues to get their viewpoint across to policy makers and ordinary people are closed to them. They seek to give voice and power back to all migrant workers and thus disrupt dominant narratives of othering because of their race, gender, ethnicity, religion, migrant illegality, and low-class status. For them, this project is a political act of resistance.

“We participate to get our voice heard. We want change in the way people view us and our plight.”

PHOTOVOICE COLLABORATOR AND CURATOR



REENA KUKREJA has over two decades of experience making award-winning documentaries on rural women in India and South Asia. She teaches in the department of Global Development Studies at Queen's University in Canada. She went to Greece to research the largely hidden experiences of undocumented South Asian male migrant agricultural workers in that country.

Her co-ethnic insider positionality as a diasporic South Asian woman with family roots in Pakistan and India and fluency

in the men's languages, Urdu, Punjabi, and Bangla, was valuable in building rapport and trust. It allowed her to bridge differences in migrant status, class, and gender identity, and to act as their cultural interpreter. The men have sought to use her “privilege” as a co-ethnic academic to mediate their perspective, through this exhibition, with a larger audience. “We trust you. After all, you are one of us. Maybe you can help getting our voice heard.” For Reena, the realization of this exhibition is a fulfilment of that promise.



“Game laga rahe han. Attempts at border crossings are called ‘game’ – a game that we play with our lives.

Why do you think one would want to play with one’s life?

Life is precious to everyone, isn’t it? Isn’t it for you, tell me?”



PHOTOVOICE AND SOUTH ASIAN MIGRANT MEN

This exhibition emerges from the work of four groups of undocumented South Asian migrant men from Bangladesh and Pakistan. From mid-2018 onwards until late 2021, they collaborated with Reena Kukreja to document their lives. Three groups comprised Bangladeshi men working as flexible labour in the strawberry agribusiness in Manolada. The fourth consisted of Pakistani men engaged in the informal economy in Athens.

The men used their cell phones to take photographs, record videos, and narrate their stories via WhatsApp, a free phone app. What made the project feasible to this adaptation was that all the migrant men possessed a cell phone and were savvy with technology. The themes ranged from work, living conditions, leisure and family, and precarity as migrant workers.

Photovoice is a participatory action visual research strategy predominantly used to work with socio-economically and/or politically marginalized populations. Participants take photographs of their lives and then have group discussions about the meaning and relevance of these images. Photovoice democratizes knowledge production and gives participants control over their representation.

Sharing these images, through exhibitions, allows photovoice participants to “re-present” themselves and convey their feelings and experiences in a relatable manner to audiences. Borrowing elements from Photovoice, the project adapted to COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions on collective gatherings, and onward migrant trajectories of participating men to ensure that collaboration and social justice elements remained integral.

While this project engages with a small set of migrant South Asian men in Greece, their visual articulation of migrant experience resonates with other migrant workers, either undocumented or with temporary foreign worker visas, engaged in precarious and dangerous work in economies across the world.

SOME AREAS OF EMPLOYMENT IN GREECE

- **AGRICULTURE:** regions around Megara, Argos, Manolada, Thebes (Thiva), Corinth, Crete, Skala-Lakonia, Karitsa, Kalamata, Koropi, and Marathona
- **INDUSTRIAL:** Aspropyrgos, Oinofita, Piraeus
- **TOURISM:** Athens, Thessaloniki, and the islands of the Cyclades and Argosaronic Gulf
- **PISCICULTURE:** Larimia
- **INFORMAL URBAN ECONOMY:** Athens, Thessaloniki



“Sweating our blood in the field, we earn huge profits for farmers who treat us worse than animals. We want people to learn how we live a rough life in baranagas.”

BARANGA

Baranga is a Bangladeshi colloquial term derived from a Greek word, paranga, which translates as “a shack.” Workers in the larger Manolada area construct the barangas out of salvaged plastic sheets, cardboard and reeds. These highly inflammable shacks, each housing 12 – 30 men, offer no running water, electricity or sanitation facilities.



WHO ARE THESE MEN?

Nearly 200,000 undocumented men from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are estimated to be in Greece. They are typically young; poorly educated, low-skilled, and from rural lower-class families. They work in low-paying and precarized immigrant-niche sectors of agriculture and the informal urban economy that are labelled as “3D jobs (dirty, demeaning, and dangerous). With the exception of Sikh migrants from India, the Bangladeshi and Pakistani men are Muslims.

The reasons for their migration are diverse yet often overlapping: chain family migration, romantic aspirations to go “overseas,” household risk diversification strategy, or breadwinner masculinity affirming strategies. Their migration occurs within a larger political economy of neoliberalism, agrarian crisis, privatization of social services such as

healthcare and education, political and civil unrest, and violence against ethnic or religious minorities.

In Greece, the institutionalization of migrant “illegality” or the exclusion from a community of legal citizens or temporary foreign workers, occurs through restrictive state policies and migration regimes governing mobility and work, and regulation of citizenship.

DAINGEROUS CROSSING, RISKING LIFE

The border crossings, either totally overland journey or involving a leg across water, are fraught with multiple risks to one's life. Inhospitable terrain, harsh weather conditions, dehydration, desertion by dunkers and frequent firings by border guards. Reaching Greece overland from Pakistan takes 40–50 days. For others such as from Bangladesh, the journey is often broken at several places for the men to earn for the next stretch of the journey.



“In Bangladesh, the only work available is in the paddy fields. It doesn’t pay much. In recent years, floods and rain keep destroying our crops. The consequence is that our debts increase and we are unable to feed our families, educate our children, or pay for the medical bills.

Who would like to leave their new-born child behind and family and migrate to a foreign land? It is the worry to feed our families that makes us take this risk.”



“THROUGH US, THE **GREEK GOVERNMENT** AND THE **FARMERS** EARN A LOT. THEIR INTEREST AND EARNINGS VESTS ON **OUR EXPLOITATION**. OTHERWISE, 2000-3000 ILLEGAL PEOPLE LIKE US CANNOT STAY IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY. THEY ALLOW US TO STAY **DELIBERATELY FOR THEIR BENEFIT.**”

(Undocumented Bangladeshi Migrant, Manolada, Greece)



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With the support of the Walloon Region within the framework of Local Integration Initiatives “Namur, intercultural city” in partnership with the Maison de la Laïcité Hénallux and the Intercultural Action Center of Namur in the program of “the fortnight of interculturality and citizenship”

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