

# Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Malaysia: Their Socio-Cultural Background and Work-Adaptability

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**ABSTRACT:** A large number of migrant workers from Bangladesh come to Malaysia because of having bilateral agreements signed by both governments from time to time since 1992. It is well known that due to some structural national inequality, a bulk of unemployed labor-force from Bangladesh temporarily migrate to many foreign countries including Malaysia seeking temporary employment in different work-organizations. It is of no denying of the fact that what a Bangladeshi worker earns in one month in Malaysia, would take a few months to earn it in back home. Because of having such structural and techno-economic difference the unemployed laborers of Bangladesh often become very much attracted and fascinated to come to Malaysia for searching employment. Based on snowball technique, this baseline survey was conducted in and around Kuala Lumpur city in Malaysia to generate quantitative data from 200 sample-workers. It provided a socio-economic and cultural background and also at the same time, added additional information on the problems and the hurdles that the Bangladeshi workers have to face on their arrival here in Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper on socio-economic traits and cultural background of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia is a field-based empirical investigation conducted within the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur city areas between 2013 and 2014. A large number of temporarily employed labour-force from many Asian and South East Asian countries including Bangladesh has been staying in Malaysia working in various sectors of the country. Evidence indicates that Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia have been providing excellent services and performing well in all working sectors of development (Abdul-Aziz, 2001; Abu-

Bakar, 2002; Karim *et.al.*, '99; Karim, 2013b; Dannecker, 2005). Despite positive performances, it becomes quite curious to know about their socio-economic traits and cultural background as it reflects about the challenges they face in working in an alien situation. In rationalizing the significance of this research, it has been posed that the background data and on socio-economic traits and culture of migrant workers is significantly related to the policy planning of human resource needs for a newly-developed country as well as the subsistence-survival of a poor economy. Contextually to make a comparison between Malaysia and Bangladesh, it is clearly documented that Bangladesh is now an extremely poor country having been placed in 142<sup>nd</sup> position of the medium

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HDI index ranking among the countries in the world (see UNDP, 2014). The economic situation of the country has further been deteriorated when it shows a persistent current account deficit, with a continuous downward trend in its international exchange rate (see Rahman *et al.*, 2006). In terms of demography, Bangladesh is in a tremendous pressure with the highest population density in the world, facing a rapidly squeezed farming land which effectually pauperizes a huge number of workless farmers compelling them to migrate to the cities and towns looking for immediate employment (Karim, 2011; 2014). "It also faces exorbitant unemployment statistics in both public and private sectors with perennial poverty situation for at least one third labour-force of the country" (Karim 2013b: 178). This structural economic condition, low level economic activities and high incidence of poverty denominator have compelled many educated and less-educated younger work force in the country to search for opportunities in many foreign lands including Malaysia, to work temporarily as migrant workers as an alternative source.

Conversely, Malaysia is a rapidly industrialized country having enormous economic development necessitating a huge demand of foreign workers to shoulder these responsibilities as supplementary work-force. To meet up with the deficiencies, workers from a few neighbouring South East Asian countries like Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia are brought in as foreign workers to work in Malaysia. At the same time, workers from South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal are also imported in the country. Bangladeshi labourers first arrived in Malaysia as plantation workers in 1986, but later on, due to a bilateral agreement signed by both countries in 1992 Bangladeshis are allowed to enter as workers in different development sectors (Karim, 2013b).

As Bangladeshi workers come to Malaysia, a question has often been raised regarding their performance at work. This question has been responded in a few studies where their performance has been rated as exceedingly satisfactory and admirable (Karim 2013b, Dannecker, 2005). Nevertheless, many of these studies however, frustratingly mentioned that these workers often face

acute problems in regard to their adjustment from socio-cultural and health perspective (Karim 2013b).

### MIGRANT WORKERS AND THEIR CONTEXTUALIZATION

Jonathan Power ('79) is perhaps the prime initiator to focus on migrant workers in the context of Western Europe, mainly outlining international migration from the perspective of labour force from receiving countries. A few years later, Hui, Bun and Beng ('91) compiled a book entitled "Crossing Borders" which incorporated a number of articles on foreign workers in South East Asian region which clearly proves that the issue of migrant worker is no longer a Western phenomenon; rather it is prevalent in Asia as well. This view point has evidently been proven when Sulaiman Al-Qudsi and Nasra Shah ('91) explained as to how the human capital framework has been utilized in charting economic progress of Kuwait which was fully accelerated by foreign workers coming from nine different nationalities.

Having identified them in the construction sector, Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia have been studied by Petra Dannecker (2005) who later published this research in a journal of AISS. In this study, she mentioned that although Bangladeshi workers mostly migrate to many destinations of the world including the Gulf countries, South Korea and Singapore, Malaysia has always remained an important place for their migration for several reasons. Since Malaysia is a preferred destination for the Bangladeshi, it is therefore essential to prepare a socio-economic and cultural profile of these workers. Simultaneously, it becomes quite logical to make an assessment of their health needs and requirements. In the prelude to this study, it is clearly indicated in the form of objectives that this research has a main purpose: to generate a substantial amount of quantitative data on the socio-cultural background of the Bangladeshi migrant workers employed temporarily in Malaysia.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is an outcome of a baseline survey conducted in and around Kuala Lumpur city in Malaysia. Based on the snowball technique, the research identified a total of 200 workers through

convenience random sampling and interviewed them face-to-face, most extensively with a set of structured questionnaire. The research was further supplemented by a few FGDs and two extensive case studies with self-narratives. Data for this research were gathered in November 2013 through February 2014. A total of 200 workers (Table 1) were interviewed face to face most extensively with a set of structured questionnaire. Based on convenience and scattered random sampling, the workers were identified through snowball technique. Although the research is open and non-selective in nature to identify the workers, a few areas like Rawang and Gombak in Kuala Lumpur were specified for being the most suitable locations for availability of Bangladeshi workers who live in large number to those areas nearer to their work-plants. These workers are found in service sector, manufacturing and construction sectors. Workers employed in diversified jobs like working in the super market, working as cleaner in different plants and offices, working in the petrol pump, working as car washer are included in the service sector. Thus the persons having been employed in the manufacturing and construction sector are separately secluded with clear identification. Apart from collecting data through structured interviews of a large number of Bangladeshi workers, two FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) were also conducted to learn about their health seeking behavior and practices in their everyday life allows us to gather some additional qualitative information on their lifestyle issues from a formal interactive discussion method.

#### SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC TRAITS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE WORKERS

Based on our objectives, this part of the research generates a substantial amount of quantitative data on the socio-economic background of the Bangladeshi workers employed temporarily in various working sectors in Malaysia. Young (2004) mentioned that learning about the demographics of a man-power is very much fascinating to predict statistically a numerical picture of their socio-cultural background and their capability in adjusting in the work-environment.

#### *Age, Education and Income*

For a meaningful analysis, the age data of the workers have been grouped into three broad categories i.e., young (up to 35 years of age), middle-aged (36 to 50 years), and old (51+). Most of the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia have clustered into young (64.5%) and middle-aged groupings which is quite normal for the migrants. The trend of younger persons migrating to foreign countries to searching for jobs and seeking employment is very much likely as they are unburdened mostly being unmarried and as such, they do not have to worry about their families at home. People who were above 50 years of age (3.5%) are usually reluctant to travel outside their country, leaving behind their big families at home.

For a precise and meaningful analysis, data on education have been clubbed into four major groupings. It is evident from Table 2, that a preponderant majority of workers i.e., 68.5% have some basic education below SSC level. Among the remaining workers, 18.5% have been found have passed SSC level examination where another 10% of the workers passed HSC examination. Although not very much prominent, at least 3% of the workers are found to have graduation and Master's degrees taken from colleges or universities. This is however is not very unlikely for the Bangladeshi workers as the educational attainment of the Bangladeshi workers is always far better than those of the workers recruited from Indonesia and the Philippines (for evidence see Karim *et al.*, '99). The workers belong to a heterogeneous earning, where the workers are often classified into four observable income range: lower income category who earn up to 1000 ringgit), middle-range income having an earning of RM 1001 to 2000 ringgit, and high income group coming from those who earn more than 2000 ringgit a month (see Karim, 2013b for details). Although we did not provide any specific sample-based quantitative data on income from this particular study, but we have been able to gather information on average income from the workers attending our FGDs. The mean average income of Bangladeshi workers fall within the range of 1000 ringgit a month where 50% of the workers belong to this category (Karim, 2013b).

*Work-Activities of the Migrant Workers and Occupational Diversities*

Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are recruited to perform multifarious work-activities in all sectors of development. We provide tables showing the sector-wise distribution of the workers and occupational diversification which promotes largely the utilization of the manpower based on requirements.

If we classify the workers based on their broad sectoral attachment, we find that 40.5% of the workers work in the service sector followed by 'floating laborers' where their proportion is 22.5%. It is further evident from Table 1 that 39 (19.5%) workers are working in the construction sector and the remaining 35 (17.5%) are employed in different manufacturing works. Although Bangladeshi migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur are not found working in the agricultural sector, many of them are also providing valuable services as farmers in the agricultural activities elsewhere in their country. For example, the principal researcher of this study recently had visited Cameron Highlands in Pahang where he met and found a huge number of Bangladeshi labourers working in the agricultural commercialized farms mostly owned by the Chinese.

TABLE 1

*Sector-wise distribution of the migrant workers*

Sectors	Number of workers (n = 200)	
	n	%
Construction	39	19.5
Manufacturing	35	17.5
Service*	81	40.5
Floating labourers**	45	22.5

\*Service sector includes all sorts of work where the workers are employed in various activities like working in the shopping malls, performing car washing, and working as cooks and restaurant attendants.

\*\* Floating labourers are performing various types of manual works usually having performed the cleaning type of jobs.

As a matter fact, initially Bangladeshi workers who arrived in the 1980s were mostly recruited for agricultural sector as many Malay rural farmers at that time started moving from their villages to the towns and cities searching for newly-created jobs in the manufacturing and commercial sectors, leaving the

TABLE 2

*Socio-cultural and demographic profile of the Bangladeshi migrant workers*

Features and variables	Respondents (n=200)	
	n	%
<i>(a) Age of the workers</i>		
Up to 35 years of age (young)	129	64.5
36-50 years (middle-aged)	64	32
51+ (older persons).	7	3.5
<i>(b) Education</i>		
Below SSC	137	68.5
Passed SSC	37	18.5
Passed HSC	20	10
Graduates from colleges/universities.	6	3
<i>(c) Residential Origin</i>		
Villages	128	64
Thana Headquarters	9	4.5
Small towns/peri-urban centers	45	22.5
Urban City Areas.	18	9
<i>(d) Region-wise residential distribution</i>		
Region/District		
Dhaka	25	12.5
Chittagong	7	3.5
Noakhali	15	7.5
Comilla	27	13.5
Barisal	23	11.5
Mymensingh	10	5
Rangpur	5	2.5
Sylhet	6	3
Bagra	10	5
Rajshahi	9	4.5
Faridpur	15	7.5
Jessore	32	16
Khulna	10	5
Pabna	6	3

agricultural activities uncared for and creating an artificial shortage of agricultural labourers in rural farms. Later to fill up the high demand for labor in the commercial, construction and other required sectors of development in the urban areas, when many Bangladeshi workers were recruited to take over this occupational activities (see Table 3).

While commercial, manufacturing and construction sectors are important sources of employment for Bangladeshi migrant workers, they are employed in other works as well as depending on the need of the organizations. Although Bangladeshi workers perform multifarious works efficiently, none of them have had any previous experience in doing such jobs back home which reflects that they take these tasks seriously and as they go along as it is a necessity for them. While responding to our questions,

TABLE 3  
*Principal types of work performed by the migrants*

Principal profession	Number (n=200)	% (Percent of total sample)
Workshop Mechanics	26	13
Drivers	6	3
Shopkeepers and Porters	30	15
Restaurant Attendants	25	12.5
Garment Workers	3	1.5
Construction Workers/ Mason	30	15
Cleaners	23	11.5
Cooks	16	8
Painters, Fitters, Paper Cutters, Electricians	23	11.5
Welder	10	5
Car Washer	8	4

180 (90%) workers unhesitatingly admitted that they did not have any such previous job experience, yet they do not face any problem in such works. In view of the extensive unemployment and underemployment in Bangladesh, it is almost certain that the migrant workers do not have any special choice for any particular work. A satisfactory analysis of occupational diversification in the distribution of their principal activities indicate that they work as workshop mechanics (13%), shopkeepers/porters (15%), restaurant attendants (12.5%), construction workers/masons, cleaners (11.5%), painters and welders (16.5%), car washers (4%) and many other activities depending on the needs and requirements of the employers (see Table 3). Such difficulties on the part of migrant workers have been noticed by many researchers where the workers are transferred continuously from one place to another in which the employers are manipulating migrant workers and putting them in constant mental pressure, "all those who are not cooperating or are demanding their rights will be victimized" (Hill, *n.d.*, p.1).

#### *Cultural Adjustment and Linguistic Factors*

In most cases, the concerns of the foreign workers are very much related to their loneliness and cultural maladjustments which have been characterized by some writers as 'cultural alienation' (Karim *et al.*, '99). Most of the Bangladeshis somehow feel comfortable working in an Islamic country such as Malaysia as they are mostly Muslims. Perhaps for that reasons, 172 (86%) of these migrant workers overwhelming expressed their feelings of comforts

staying in Malaysia. While asking the question as to what makes them comfortable in staying in this country, the most important factor is the gentle behavior the politeness of the Malay people. Many of them identified Malaysia as peaceful country with political stability and ethnic tolerability. They also find Malaysian culture and food almost similar to their own in Bangladesh. Yet, many workers faced some loneliness and also complained that the local people often keep some distance against them. Being foreigners, they are also often robbed of their money on the streets and are harassed by the police due to their visa and work permit. A few workers also mentioned that they do not get their salary on time and their working hours also go beyond the prescribed eight hours for which they often get exhausted. But through informal sitting with them, we learned that many of them do not mind working for more than eight hours as they are paid extra money for this work.

Language is not a serious problem for the Bangladeshis as 98.5% of the workers have some proficiency in spoken Bahasa Malaysia. Initially after their arrival, the workers face some difficulties in communicating with the local people but soon they get acquainted with their language and culture. Since the Bangladeshi workers do not interact the public directly outside their jobs, so alien culture and linguistic barriers do not impede them to adjust with the local people. Those who have been living here for a few years, they communicate with the local people comfortably; they first learn some basic words and sentences and later, slowly learn the language in their day to day interaction.

Since migrant workers often find difficulties in mixing with the local people at the community level, it is therefore quiet obvious that they will find their own community to interact themselves. Their ultimate and first friends are usually the same fellow workers with whom they eat, talk and gossip during the breaks in works. Since workers usually share one single room or accommodation, they often congested and unhealthy, as I found five Bangladeshi car washers living in one single room without any ventilation which could roughly be measured 200 sq feet, where they cook, dine and sleep together on the same floor.

Beyond the workplace, the workers often meet some Malay local people in the same neighborhood

with whom they often interact in a very low profile; but they never become too close to each other. Rather, they keep some distance with the locals yet, they prefer to stay in the Malay community, instead of living with the Chinese or Indians. This is perhaps because of a kind of Muslim brotherhood feeling and having a similarity of their food and culture.

### CONCLUSIONS

The research is an outcome of a field-based empirical investigation into the lives and living of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, recording a substantial amount of demographic information about their socio-economic and cultural traits. Especially significant from the social background model, the research relates the socio-economic and cultural understanding of Bangladeshi migrant workers based on quantitative information and also through ascertaining their own narratives in the form of qualitative investigation. Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are recruited to perform multifarious work-activities in all sectors of development. While commercial, manufacturing and construction sectors are important branches of employment for Bangladeshi migrant workers, nevertheless, their occupational diversification is determined by the nature of economic needs and requirements of the local plants and organizations where they seek employment. Although Bangladeshi workers perform many type of works efficiently, none of them have had any previous experiences in doing such jobs in back home which reflects that they make serious devotion to their works and take it quite seriously as they have to go along with their works as these are necessity for them.

Migrant workers are mostly young and middle-aged people who take risk to come abroad as strong work-force contributing enormously in Malaysian economy. The trend of younger persons migrating to foreign countries to searching for jobs and seeking employment is very much likely as they are unburdened mostly being unmarried and as such, they do not have any worries about their families at home. A preponderant majority of Bangladeshi workers i.e., 68.5% have some basic education below SSC level and among the remaining people, 28.5% have been found to have passed SSC and HSC level

examinations. Although not very much prominent, at least 3% of the workers are found to have graduation and Master's degrees taken from colleges or universities in Bangladesh. This is however not very much surprising for the Bangladeshi workers, as the educational attainment of the Bangladeshi workers is always far better than those of the workers recruited from other countries like Indonesia and the Philippines (for evidence see Karim *et al.*, '99). The workers belong to a heterogeneous earning; their income ranges from low income categories to higher income categories having classified them into four distinctive income ranges. The mean average income of Bangladeshi workers falls within the range of 1000 ringgit a month where 50% of the workers belong to this category (see Karim 2013b). Language is not a serious problem for the Bangladeshi workers as 98.5% of the workers have some proficiency in spoken Bahasa Malaysia. Initially after their arrival, the workers face some difficulties in communicating with the local people but sooner they become acquainted with their language and get adjusted with Malaysian culture.

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