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**The Asian Economic Crisis and
Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore**

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The Asian Economic Crisis and Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore

Abstract

This paper documents the impact of the Asian economic crisis on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. The study focuses on the unskilled Bangladeshi workers whose work permits were cancelled due to the economic crisis. Singapore is host to 450,000 foreign workers. The recent economic crisis of the region has caused a significant economic slowdown in Singapore. The worsening labor market conditions of Singapore are not expected to lead to massive retrenchment and repatriation of foreign workers because of the policy of retaining workers by performance rather than by their nationality. This policy is a significant departure in relation to conventional wisdom where foreign workers are viewed as “disposable”. But anyway this policy to retain skilled workers has led to a hard competition between skilled and unskilled workers and eventually the unskilled workers have been put in a vulnerable position. In the first five months of 1998, about 7,000 work permits were canceled compared to 6,000 in the whole of 1997. It was estimated that total 16,800 foreign workers might lose their work permits in 1998. In spite of the economic crisis, the flow of new unskilled workers has not stopped. Bangladesh exported about 27,659 workers between July 1997 to May 1998 since the crisis started in July 1997. Who migrated? Why did they migrate? What are the economic costs and benefits from this migration? These are the questions that will be investigated in this paper. This paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected in December 1998 by face to face interviews of 50 workers out of about 900 workers whose work permits were cancelled. Secondary data is collected from various published materials.

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The Asian Crisis and the Plight of Migrant workers

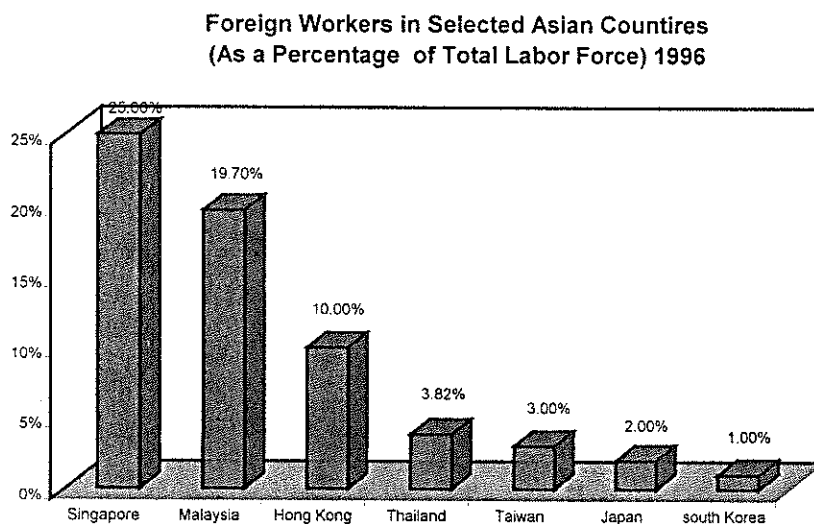
Labor migration is a global phenomenon. The World Bank estimates that at least 125 million people live outside of their home countries and that each year another 2 – 3 million people join this pool (*Business Asia*, June 2 1997). However, it is no longer just the wealthy OECD countries that draw these migrants. Over the past decade, newly industrialized countries of Asia have begun to attract large numbers of workers (Figure-1). Basic economics explains one aspect of this recent surge in labor migration. As the economics of the newly industrialized countries (NICs) approached full capacity, excess labor has dried up. Even low skilled domestic workers were able to move into better paying positions. To find bodies to fill less desirable spots – the so-called “3D” jobs: dirty, dangerous and difficult- planners turned to foreign workers. The international Labor Organization estimated in 1995 that there were between six and seven million Asians working abroad. The estimate for 1997 was close to eight million (*Human Rights Watch*, 1998).

Remarkable economic growth in the Asian NICs in the 1980s propelled a dramatic increase in intra-regional migration in Asia. Before then Asia was mainly a sending region of migrants to more developed regions. Development and the need to sustain economic growth transformed Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and later Malaysia and Thailand into labor-importing countries. As these countries approached full employment, and as their own population moved into better-paying jobs, a vacuum was created in the so-called 3-D jobs. To fill the demand for workers at the low-end and unskilled jobs in manufacturing, plantations, agriculture and fisheries, and domestic services, receiving countries, some reluctantly, some more openly, turned to foreign workers.

Among the Asian receiving countries, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan have established policies and mechanisms for the importation of foreign workers, particularly less-skilled migrant workers. At the other extreme is Japan, which does not consider herself a labor-importing country, however as a policy, allows the entry of unskilled workers only if they are of Japanese descent. Korea too, is not very keen in allowing the entry of less skilled workers. Both Japan and Korea instituted the foreign-

trainee program wherein foreign trainees supposedly receive on-the-job skills training and trainees' allowances (not wages) in Japanese and Korean companies (See for example *Human Rights Watch*, 1998). Observers think that this scheme is simply a roundabout way of bringing in unskilled workers without tampering with the official policy of not admitting unskilled workers.

Figure-1

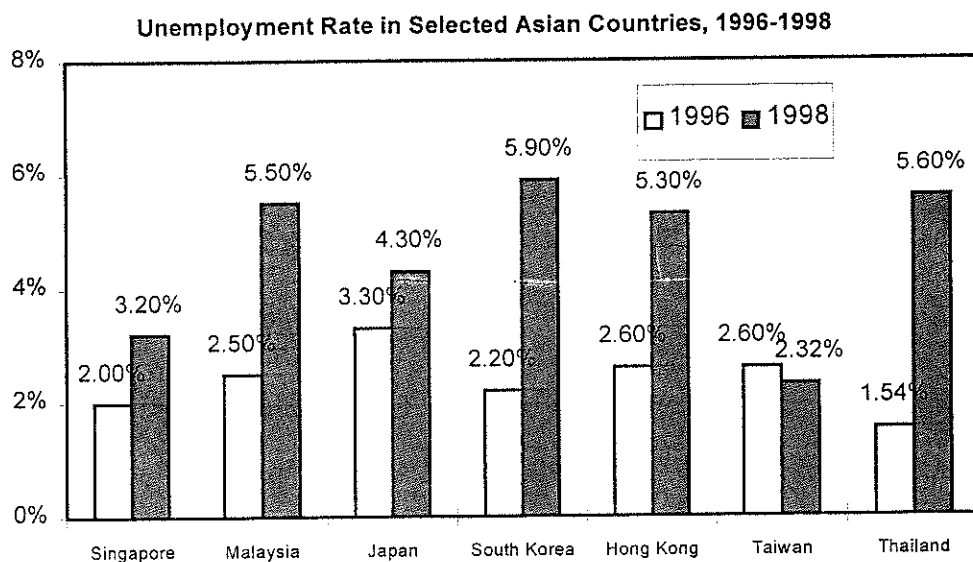


Source: Hui, 1998; Pillai, 1998; Thailand's and Hong Kong's estimated by Author

The recent financial crisis that started in July 1997 in Thailand and spread quickly to other Asian countries, surprised everybody and changed people's perception of the Asian miracle. The Asian miracle has suddenly given way to the Asian crisis. "From miracle to meltdown", "from miracle to debacle"- these are the new catch-phrases describing the crisis that has swept across the continent (Kwok, 1999). The crisis has affected the economics of the receiving countries in varying degrees of severity. Thailand is believed to be the hardest hit by the crisis, followed by Korea and Malaysia (Battisella, 1998) Korea's descent, from being the world's eleventh largest economy to becoming an IMF patient, is perhaps the most dramatic and unexpected. The impact of the current financial turmoil was not only limited to the financial sector but it has also affected the labor markets in many

Asian countries. Unemployment rates rose in almost all affected countries because of the recession caused by the financial turmoil (Figure-2). To preserve jobs for their nationals, labor-importing countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Korea started to repatriate their foreign workers. According to estimates from the Asian Migrant Center, more than 933,000 migrant workers are expected to be expelled or laid off by the end of 1998 due to this crisis. (*Business Asia*, August 10 1998)

Figure-2



Sources: Joseph, 1998; Sek-Hong, 1998; Hui, 1998, Park, 1998;
Business Asia, 10 August 1998

Among Asian labor exporting countries, the main exporters are Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, China, Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Thailand and Malaysia are both labor-importing and labor-exporting countries. For example Malaysia has 250,000 workers abroad, about 200,000 of them in Singapore including 50,000 who commute daily across the causeway (*Business Asia*, June 2 1997). Bangladesh, The Philippines and Indonesia, by virtue of their direct involvement and /or insertion in the migration system in the region, are among the manpower exporting countries most affected by the current Asian economic turmoil. The following Table-1 portrays an overall view of the impact of Asian economic crisis on migrant workers.

Table-1

**Total Volume of Foreign Workers, Sacked and Sent Back Home in Asia
(1997-1998)**

Country	Legal migrant workers	Illegal migrant workers	Total Migrant workers	Impact on Migrant Workers : Workers Sacked and Sent Back Home
South Korea	300,000	123,299	423,299 some observers estimates the number would be more than 700,000	From 12/97 to 3/98 under an amnesty program for undocumented migrant workers, 46,569 left Korea. There were 95,027 foreigners who had overstayed their visas as of June 1998. 300,000 were deported (6/97-1/98). 100,000 more are to be expelled by 1999.
Malaysia	1,140,000	560,000	1,700,000 Some others estimate the number will be as high as 3 million	Malaysia targets to repatriate about 900,000 migrant workers, documented or undocumented, in 1998. Malaysia deported 255,483 migrant workers by Nov. 98. Only in February and March, 98, about 7,000 illegal are arrested and awaiting for repatriation. In mid March 1998, 17,000 Indonesians were being held in detention centers waiting for deportation.
Thailand	316,000	943,000	1,260,000 Some others estimates the number will be more than 2.5million	Thailand planned on repatriating over 900,000 undocumented migrants with the first 300,000 scheduled for repatriation on May1, 1998. 800,000 Burmese political refugee are at risk of repatriation from Thailand. 6,000 Burmese were expelled (6/97 -1/98).
Singapore	506,600	NA	506,600	More than 7,000 foreign workers had their work permits canceled in the first 5 months of 1998 compared to about 6,000 cancellation for the whole of 1997. And if this pace continues, there could be 16,800 cancellations for 1998. In 1998, a total of 23,000 illegal and overstayers are arrested. In 1997, the number was 14,000.
Hong Kong	170,000	130,000	300,000	Filipino workers protested on December 6, 1998 against proposed 20% cut in their minimum wage, now \$494 a month. One maid reported that she had borrowed \$1,200 to get her Hong Kong job and reducing her pay would make it hard to repay her loan. Hong Kong has about 170,000 foreign domestic workers, of whom 80% are Filipinos.
Japan	106,000	288,000	394,000	In 1997 Japan repatriated 40,000 Filipino and Korean workers
Taiwan	239,000	100,000	339,000	Not available

Sources: *Business Asia*, 1998; *ILO Report*, 1998; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1998; *Asia*, 1999; *The Sunday Times*, 1998; *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol.7, No.2-3, 1998; *Asian Migration News*, 1998.

Singapore – A Land of Opportunity

Singapore, founded on immigrant labor, is a city-state with a land of only 641 square kilometers and a population of about 3 million. High export-led growth in the late 1960s and 1970s created an excess of labor demand over domestic supply. As early as 1968, tight immigration policy was relaxed to admit workers from the Malaysian Peninsula, the traditional source. By 1973, non-citizen work permit holders constituted an estimated 12.5% of the total work force (Pang, 1982).

The recession in 1974-'75 resulted in repatriation of significant number of guest workers from labor-intensive manufacturing industries. In order to ease the labor shortage that had arisen following recovery in 1978, a daily work permit system was introduced to allow Malaysians to commute to work in Singapore. At the same time employers were allowed to recruit workers from Non-Traditional Source (NTS) countries such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Thailand. As a consequence of these new regulations, the number of foreign workers jumped from a low of 53,412 in 1975 to 80,131 in 1978 and 93,112 in 1979. By 1980, the number had risen to 120,000 (Wong, 1997).

Singapore faced the next economic recession in 1985-1986. This time 102,000 jobs were lost and 60,000 foreign workers were retrenched and repatriated. Among 60,000 foreign workers, more than 60 percent were from the construction sector (Wong: 1997). With the economic recovery gaining momentum in 1988, the number of foreign workers continued to grow with 150,000 in 1988, rising to 200,000 in 1990 (Wong, 1997).

With the recent economic recession since July 1997, Singapore has adopted some new steps in labor policy. For example in case of a retrenchment, the better workers, regardless of nationality, should be retained. This policy is a significant departure not only in relation to implicit government policy during the 1985 recession (when local workers had priority over foreign workers) but also in relation to conventional wisdom where foreign workers are viewed as “disposable” in times of crisis. It is an epoch-making policy in the history of international labor migration. Because it not only upholds the rights of migrant workers in a host country but also gives an opportunity of open competition irrespective of class, race, language or nationality. This policy helped to avoid any massive deportation of foreign workers from Singapore unlike other countries of Asia.

Table-2

Singapore: Size of Foreign Labor Force, (1970- 98)

Year	Total Labor Force	Foreign Workers	Percentage of Labor Force
1970	650,892	20,828	3.2
1980	1,077,090	119,483	7.4
1990	1,480,000	200,000	13.5
1995	1,749,300	384,800	21.99
1996	1,801,900	454,200	25.2
1997	1,876,000	506,600	27.01
1998	1,931,800	450,000	23.29

Source: Wong, 1997; Hui, 1998; Ministry of Manpower, Singapore 1998

The figure 450,000, is taken from speech given by Minister for Manpower, Singapore, in November 25, 1998.

The government has reduced the levy for skilled foreign workers from S\$ 100 to S\$30 for all sectors with effect from 1st January 1999. Within a period of less than a year, the government have reduced the foreign worker levy for skilled workers from S\$ 200 to S\$30. The reduction of levy for unskilled foreign workers is S\$ 90. This reduction is applicable to companies in the manufacturing, marine and service sectors to enhance their export competitiveness. The levy for unskilled foreign construction workers was not reduced. Rationale for this is that construction is a domestic industry and is not directly vulnerable to international competition.

Singapore is passing through an economic downturn. As unemployment rates go up, more and more local workers are losing jobs. Dr. Lee Boon Yang, the Minister for Manpower, Government of Singapore, revealed that the total retrenchment for the year 1998 was about 27,000 and the unemployment rate in September 1998, was 4.5 percent (12 January, 1999 at Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Center). He mentioned that there are 450,000 foreign workers on work permits in Singapore. According to data from Ministry of Home Affairs of Singapore, the number of illegal immigrants and over-stayers arrested were 23,000 in 1998 compared to 14,000 in 1997 (*The Strait Times*: 6 February, 1999). But in 1994, 9,846 over-stayers and illegal immigrants were arrested (*The Straits Times*, October 28 1995).

In the first five months of 1998, 7,000 foreign workers had their work permits cancelled compared to about 6,000 cancellations for the whole of 1997. It is estimated that the figure might reach to 16,800 by end of 1998 (*The Straits Times*, June 29, 1998). At the time of the present economic recession, the decision to give priority to skilled workers is very pragmatic. However, it has affected the unskilled workers in Singapore. The majority of Bangladeshi

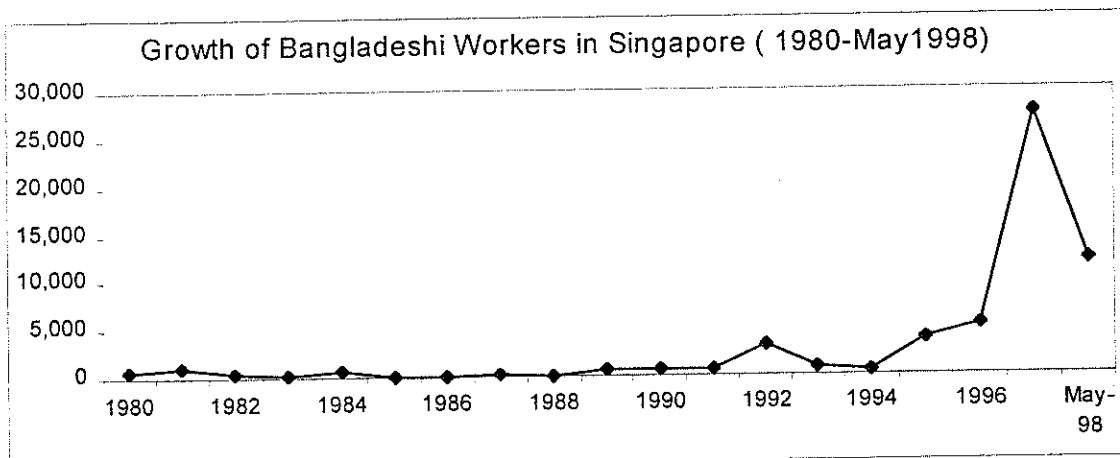
of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore are unskilled and they are found mainly in the construction sector. The lack of sufficient skill to cope with the rising competition has placed them in a vulnerable position.

Trend of Migration of Bangladeshi Workers to Singapore

The history of migration from Bangladesh started with the mass migration of Bangladeshi workers for oil-rich Arab countries in mid-1970s. Until the Gulf Crisis of 1990-'91, newly industrialized countries of Asia were little known to Bangladeshi workers as a land of opportunity. The gulf crisis caused massive deportation of workers from Arab countries. This massive deportation led to a diversification in the destination of migrant workers, mostly to Southeast and East Asia. The migration of Bangladeshi workers to Singapore was very low during the 1980s, however in the 1990s the flow of migration gained momentum. Following figure -3 depicts the gradual increase of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore

(Figure-3).

Figure-3



Source: BMET 1998, Bangladesh

Observers believe that the real volume of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore will be much more than the official number given above because of the lack of sophisticated mechanisms in obtaining records of migrant workers and the exportation of workers

through individual and private initiatives. Farid Alam of Bangladesh High commission in Singapore, informed me the number of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore will be about 60,000. Remittances sent by Bangladeshi workers play a vital role in the economy of Bangladesh. The total volume of remittance sent by Bangladeshi workers abroad was US \$1,222.4 million for financial year 1997-1998 (July to May) and the amount for financial year 1996-1997 was US \$1,214.31million(Bangladesh Bank, 1998).

Though there is only anecdotal evidence pertaining to the migration of professional, skilled and unskilled workers to Singapore. It is generally assumed that more than 80% of the workers who are in Singapore are unskilled construction workers. According to the official report of 1997, about 231,077 workers migrated to abroad and among them about 70% were semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Ahmed, 1998). Diana Wong points out that the Singapore foreign labor market is ethnically segmented. She pinpoints that the construction sector is dominated by Thai semi-skilled and Bangladeshi (general) workers. Malaysians in the construction industry tend to be skilled workers (Wong, 1997). Between 1993 and 1997, an estimated 140,000 foreign workers, mostly from Non-Traditional Source (NTS) countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, and Thailand have been employed in the construction sector (Hui, 1998). More recent data says that there are more than 200,000 foreign construction workers and 100,000 foreign maids in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, February 23 1999).

In spite of the present economic crisis, 27,659 Bangladeshi workers migrated to Singapore from July 1997 to May 1998. Who are these migrated workers? Why did they migrate? What are the economic costs and benefits from their migration? These are the questions that will be investigated here.

Methodology

This paper is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected in December 1998 by their face to face interviews of 50 workers out of about 900 workers whose work permits were cancelled. All respondents were unskilled construction workers. Sample size is 50 and it is based on random sampling. The interviews were taken with

carefully structured questionnaire having both open-ended and closed category questions. Interviews were done in the mother tongue of workers that is Bengali language.

Workers responses were sometimes cross-checked by documents. Particularly with regard to working months and payment of salary, workers were asked to show some documents against their claims. Some workers showed me a slip of working days and amount of payment of salary. Secondary data is collected from various published materials. Internet resources are widely used.

Socio-Demographic Profile of Workers

Bangladeshi workers in Singapore are young. More than 88% of the workers are aged 30 and below. The age group of 26 to 30 comprises 44% of the workers. The Age group of 20 and below and the age group of 36 and above comprise jointly 16% of workers (Figure4). All workers had schooling at least 2 or 3 years in their whole life. About 74% of the workers have their primary education (Figure-5). It means they had only 1 to 5 years of schooling in their life which is next to 'no education' or illiteracy. Secondary education means schooling from 5 to 10 years and higher secondary education 10 to 12 years, and tertiary education is above 12 years of schooling. Only 16% workers are from secondary education background and 8% and 2% from higher secondary and tertiary education background respectively. This means that the educational level of Bangladeshi workers who migrated to Singapore recently is very low. It is noteworthy that Singapore is an English speaking country. Anja Rudnick who studied Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia in 1996 found that among 52 workers in Factory -3, 20% of them were university graduates (Rudnick, 1996:50).

Figure- 4

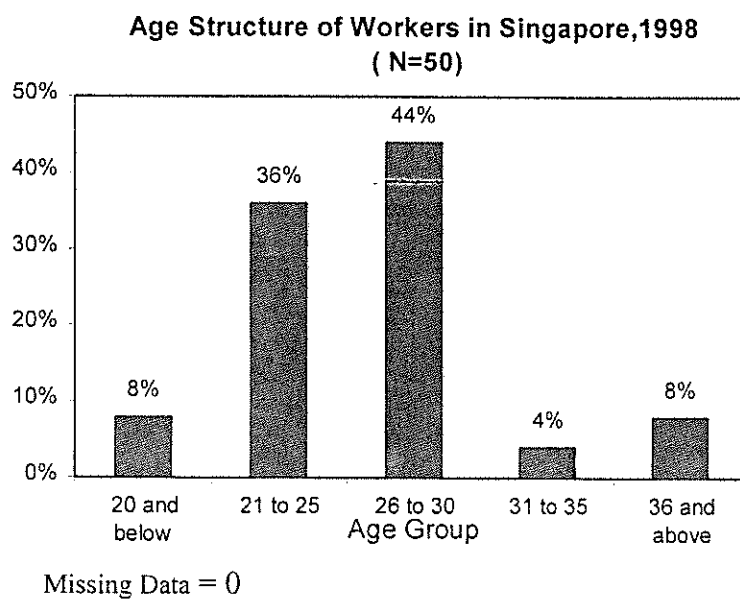
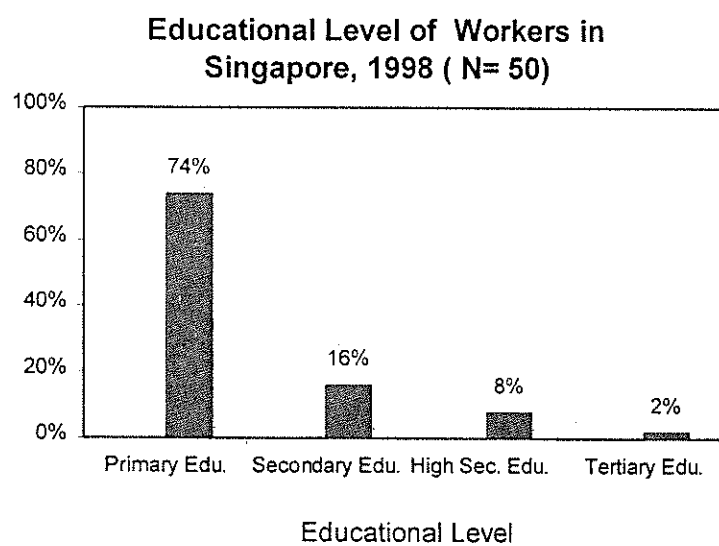


Figure -5



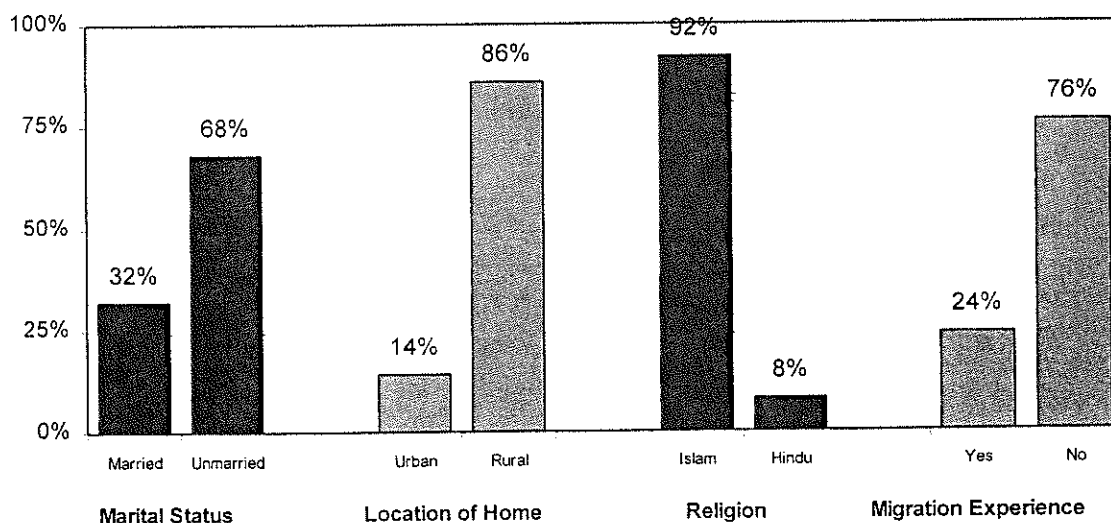
With regard to the location of the homes of workers in Bangladesh, it is found that 86% of the workers are from rural areas of Bangladesh and only 14% of the workers are from semi-urban or urban or metropolitan areas (Figure-6). Bangladesh is basically a rural country. Rural people have hardly any access to modern facilities. Therefore, the low level of education and rural background of workers made them vulnerable to any exploitation.

68% of the workers are unmarried and 32% are married (Figure-5). Most of the workers are Muslims. Bangladesh is predominantly a muslim-inhabitant country and about 88.3% and 10.5% are Muslim and Hindu respectively (World Fact Book, 1997). The percentages of Muslim and Hindu workers in Singapore are 92% and 8% respectively. With respect to migration experience of workers, 24% of the workers have international migration experience and 76% of the workers have no international migration experience.

Again among 24% of the workers, half of them were abroad for more than 5 years.

Figure-6

Marital Status, Location of Home, Religion and Migration Experience of Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore, 1998 (N= 50)



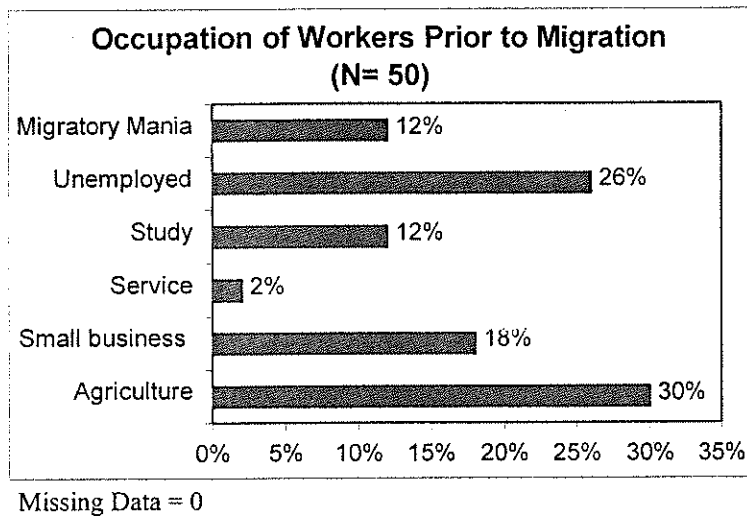
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In the case of occupations of workers before their departure for Singapore, 30% of the workers were in agriculture, 18% in small businesses and 2% in services (Figure- 7).

Occupations of the heads of family of migrant workers are mainly agriculture, small businesses, and services. While occupation of the heads of family of 60% workers is agriculture, only 30% of the workers were with agriculture before their departure for Singapore. It indicates greater mobility in occupational structure of rural people. Some workers informed me that their families could not depend only on agriculture because of risks associated with it. And they think of migration as a means of not only maximizing expected income, but also minimizing risks and loosening constraints associated with a variety of market failures. This view complies with views of the theory of the new economics of migration. A key insight of this theory is that migration decisions are not made by isolated individual actors, but by larger units of related people - typically families or households - in which people act collectively not only to maximize income, but also to minimize risks. It posits that migration is a response to income risk and to failures in a variety of markets like insurance, credit, labor, which together constrain local income opportunities and inhibit risk-spreading (See for example, Stark and Bloom, 1985; Stark and Levhari, 19982; Katz and Stark,1986).

26% of the workers were unemployed at home. Some students also headed to Singapore for work. 12% of the workers were students before their departure for Singapore. While occupation of 16% the heads of family of the workers are service, only 2% of the workers were in service before moving to Singapore. Total labor force of Bangladesh is 56 million and by occupation, 63% is in agriculture, 25% is in service and 10% is in industry and mining (*World Fact Book*, 1997). The unemployment rate of Bangladesh was 35.2% in 1996 (*World Fact Book*, 1997). The high unemployment rate accompanied by high percentage of labor force in agricultural occupation that is affected by low level of productivity and high risk of natural disasters, focuses on the pervasiveness of structural factors of international migration in Bangladesh.

Figure-7



It is observed that there are some workers who are always on repeated migration. 12% of the workers had 5 years and above international migration experience and still have no intention to stop moving to countries. They are not satisfied with the jobs or works available to them at home. Their qualifications do not permit better paying jobs and again there is an extreme competition in the job market. Besides these, the outlook that they have developed from their early international migration conflicts with the prevailing mode of life at home country. These migrants are not happy with the facilities available in Bangladesh. Some of them told me that they could not adjust with the people around them. They even opine that non-migrants are very narrow in their beliefs and attitudes. Thus all these factors give birth to a sense of 'social estrangement' among them. They think that they are estranged from the greater society and they are no more part of that society. Thus they look for another country to escape this situation at home. All these attitudes reflect what I called "migratory mania". By migratory mania I mean, a mania of international economic migrants for further migration with no sign of stopping. Although they represent only 12% of the workers, I think, they are an emergent trend in international labor migration.

Socio-Economic Constraints of Workers

Contract labor migration of Bangladeshi workers to Singapore takes place under a very complicated network of middlemen. A middleman is the person who assists in migration procedures. There is a hierarchy of middlemen ranging from central level to local level and the district acts as a unit of operation. The network of middlemen is active only in certain districts in Bangladesh. There is a co-relation between the functioning of network and volume of migration from a district. The majority of workers are from few districts of Bangladesh. Some such districts are Dhaka, Tangail, Munshiganj, Gazipur, Comilla, Sariatpur and Narayanganj. Most of the workers have some relatives or friends who have migrated from the same districts. Workers are recognized by the districts they belong to. They have a higher sense of attachment among the people of the same district that I coined here as “districtism”. By “districtism” I mean, the feeling of belonging to a particular district and the willingness to do favors for people from the same district over people of other districts. This “districtism” acts as an instrument of integration and mobilization. It links the earlier, current and potential migrants. These social networks create a self-perpetuating migration system. Social network approach acknowledges that structural imbalances provide conditions for potential movement, but this potential is translated into movement flows only when links between various people, places and mediating structures are actually activated through social networks. Once these links are established, a cascading system of migration emerges that is held together by a series of interpersonal relationships (See for example, Kritiz, 1992; Lindquest, 1993; Fawcett, 1987; Nigel, 1995; Portes, 1981). This case study implies the existence and functioning of a migrant network among Bangladeshi workers.

Middlemen at various levels do all the migration procedures for prospective migrants. The only duty of a tentative migrant is to pay the money in advance and wait for the flight to Singapore. The cost of migration is not paid directly to the central middleman in Bangladesh. Money is paid to local middleman and he later transfers it to the central middleman. Besides these two middlemen, there are a few other middlemen who assist to complete the procedures smoothly. Every middleman gets a fixed percentage of the economic cost of migration for his work. These middlemen are regulated by a chain-like relationship. They are extremely loyal to the central middleman. The central middleman

generally hides his identity to prospective migrants. Local middlemen do not introduce the central middleman to workers. Though the 1 middleman gets a small profit, the maximum risk is borne by him. He is the main person who convinces the prospective migrant and collects the entire economic cost of migration.

The whole processes of migration may take even two years to complete. At the time of the interviews, it was noticed that 32% of the workers paid their first payment for migration even 12 months earlier. And at the time of the first payment, 55.9% of the workers paid US\$ 2,222 and above for migration to Singapore. 29.4% of the workers gave their first payment 8 - 12 months ago. And 40% of the workers paid US\$1,111 to 2,222 at their first payment (Table-3 and 4 and Figure-8 and 9).

Some respondents do not know the exact time and amount of the first payment. Sixteen respondents out of the fifty respondents told me that they did not know the time and the amount of first payment exactly. This is because their parents or guardians paid the cost of migration for them.

Table -3

Time of First Payment before Migration to Singapore, 1998 (N=50)

Time of payment	Frequency	Percent
12 months and before	11	22
8 - 12 months	10	20
4 - 8 months	9	18
4 months and below	4	8
Unknown	16	32
Total	50	100

Table-4

Amount of First Payment before Migration to Singapore, 1998 (N=50)

Amount of first Payment	Frequency	Percent
US\$ 2,222 and above	19	38
US\$ 1,666 to 2,222	6	12
US\$ 1,111 to 1,666	8	16
US\$ 1,111 and below	1	2
Unknown	16	32
Total	50	100

Note: US\$ 1= Taka 45 (Bangladeshi Currency). This was the approximate exchange rate in 1997.

Figure-8

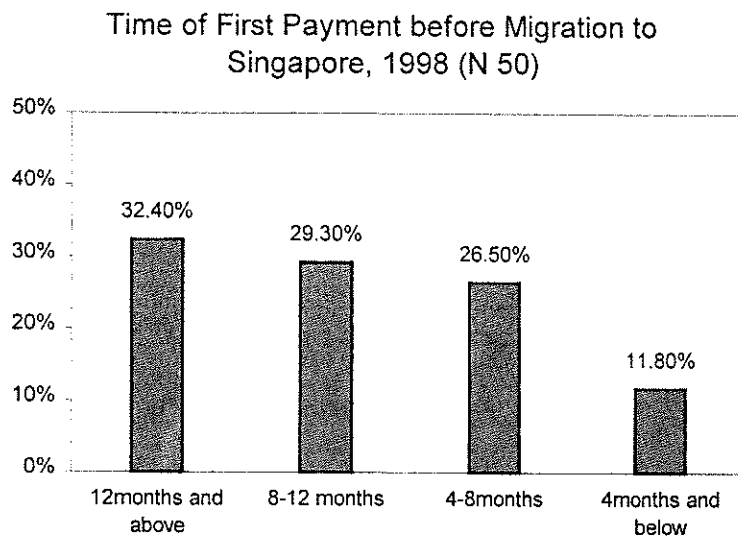
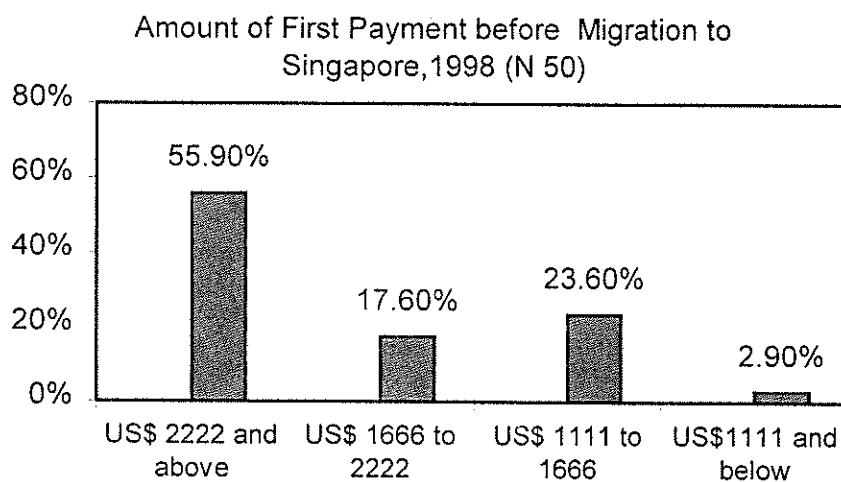


Figure-9

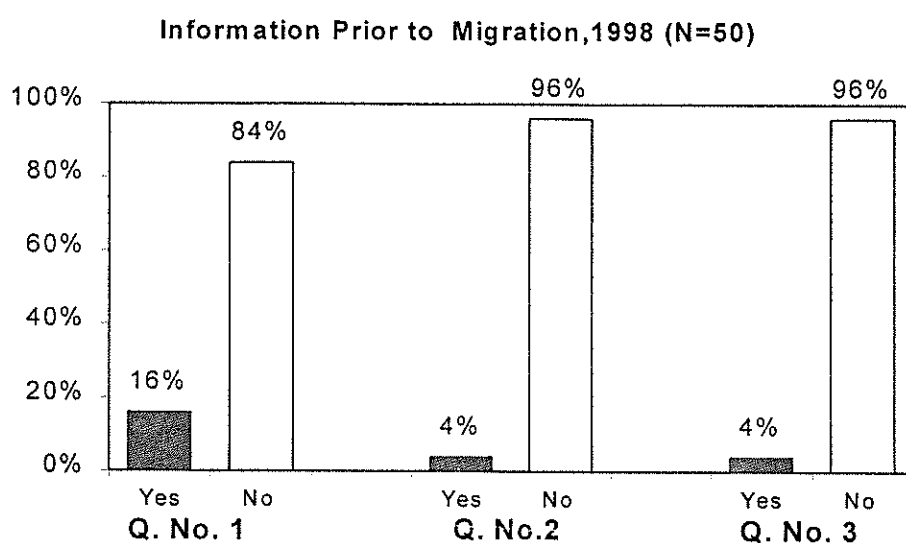


From the charts “*Time of First payment*” and “*Amount of First Payment*”, it is obvious that workers are hooked into a long time high-risk project from which they can rarely escape. So any crisis in a host country between these periods does not usually affect their migration decision unless they are banned from migrating.

There is always a lack of information about the working condition, salary and prospects of economic gain in the host country. Workers who are in Singapore do not always disclose their life style and experience to relatives and friends at home. There are several reasons for this. The first reason is that workers are highly conscious of the nature of work they do. There are some odd jobs that are given a low level of social prestige in Bangladesh. As for example jobs like cleaning latrines, floors, drains, road and manual work in the construction sector are considered lower level jobs. Workers do these jobs in Singapore but they are not ready to disclose these to friends or relatives at home because of status consciousness. The nature of work is an indicator of prestige to them. The second reason is to block the flow of information by migrant workers. There is an attempt to monopolize this access to potential class mobility by blocking the accurate information. Thus all these factors lead to block the flow of accurate information to friends and relatives at home. As a result local middleman become the main source of information for potential migrants. These local middlemen do not miss the opportunity to exploit prospective migrants by giving them an imaginary picture about the host country. There is a great inconsistency between the promised salary and the supposed opportunity and real salary and opportunities in Singapore. No workers at the time of interview told me that they had received the benefits promised by local middlemen.

This is an era of revolution in information. But these migrant workers have hardly any access to information partly because of ignorance and partly because of lack of access. Most of the workers were unaware of the Asian economic crisis and the conditions of the labor market in Singapore. I asked them whether they knew at home the risk associated with the cancellation of a work permit. 84% of the workers replied that they did not know the risk of cancellation of work permits. If they had known of it at home, 96% of the workers would not have come to Singapore (Figure-10).

Figure-10



Missing Data = 0

Question No. 1.

Did you know the risk of cancellation of work permit at home?

Question No. 2

If you knew about the risk of cancellation of work permit, would you come?

Question No. 3

Will you come to Singapore again?

16% of workers replied that they knew the risk of the cancellation of work permits. But they did not know that work permits could be cancelled even after 4/5 months of work. When I asked them about the future intention of migration to Singapore, 96% of workers showed no intention at all to come to Singapore again. Their reaction to future plans indicates that if they had known the real situation, they would not have come to Singapore.

Bangladeshi workers are systematically deprived of accurate information about the host country. Middlemen use information as a commodity and a lack of information acts as an instrument of exploitation towards prospective migrants. Again migration procedures take a long-time and demand advance payment. So workers can hardly protest once the

deal is done. Thus the socio-economic constraints, together with structural factors of international migration, drive workers into a world of uncertainty and vulnerability.

The Costs and Benefits of Migration

The economic cost of migration of Bangladeshi workers to Singapore depends on the number of middlemen and the nature of the employers in Singapore. It is observed that if numbers of middlemen are many, the cost of migration will be high and vice versa. By the nature of employers I mean, what type of employers – direct or indirect. Direct employers are defined as employers who import workers for their own companies only. Indirect employers are defined as those who import workers in order to supply them to other companies for work. Workers frequently use the terms “Direct Employer” and “Indirect Employer or Supplier” to indicate these two types of employers.

The economic cost of migration of 72% of the workers is between US\$ 4,444 to 4,888 (Table-5 and Figure-11). The cost of migration of 18% of the workers is between US\$ 4,000 to 4,444. 8% of the workers pay US\$ 4,000 or below and 2% of the workers pay US\$ 4,888 or above for their economic cost of migration. Middlemen in Bangladesh and Singapore pocket this high cost of migration. It is believed that with some exception, about two-thirds of the economic cost goes to the pockets of Singapore’s agents. And the rest goes to middlemen in Bangladesh.

Table-5

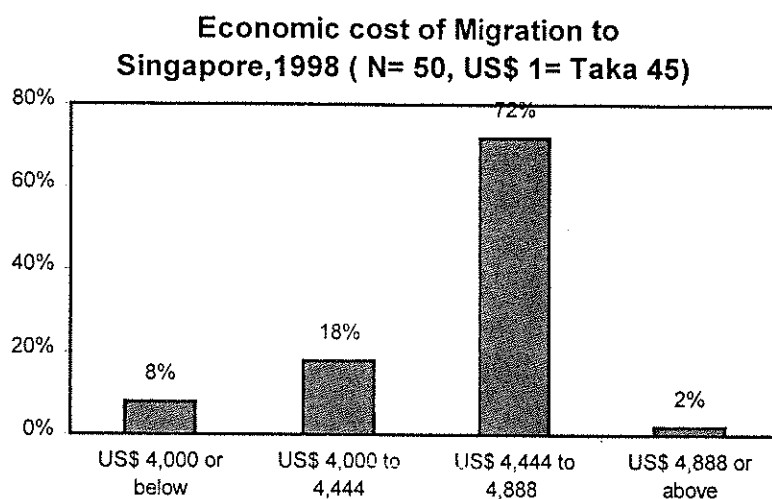
Economic Cost of Migration to Singapore, 1998 (N= 50)

Amount Paid for Migration	Frequency	Percent
US\$ 4,000 or below	4	8.0
US\$ 4,000 to 4,444	9	18.0
US\$ 4,444 to 4,888	36	72.0
US\$ 4,888 or above	1	2.0
Total	50	100.0

Missing Data: 0

Note: US\$ 1 = Taka 45 (Bangladeshi Currency). This was the approximate exchange rate in 1997.

Figure-11



Missing Data = 0

Workers obtain funds for their migration from various sources (Table-6 and Figure-13). 66% of the workers collect their fund through combined source that is through selling or mortgaging land, loans from relatives or money-lenders, minor family savings and selling livestock, paddy and gold ornaments. These combined sources cover the complete cost of migration of 66% of the workers. The full cost of migration of 16% of the workers comes from overseas relatives. These workers have some relatives overseas who pay the cost of migration for these workers. 18% of the workers obtained the complete cost of migration from their personal or family savings or from the savings of former migrants.

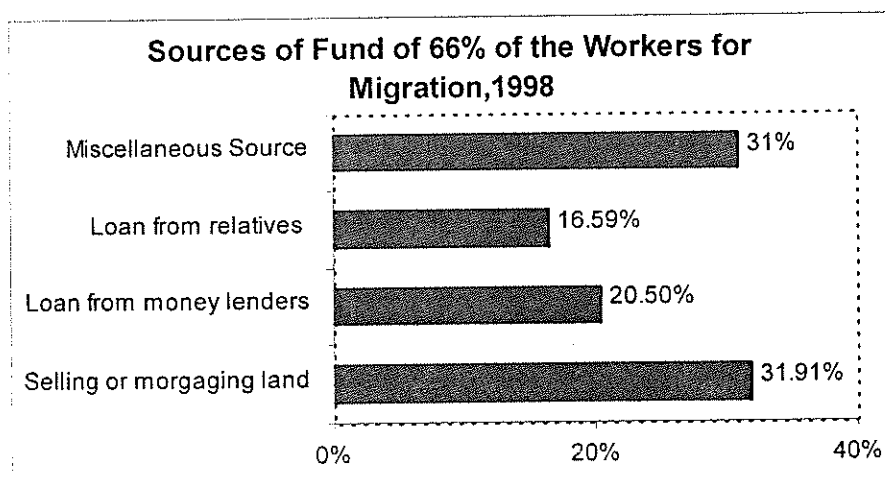
The ways of collecting funds in order to meet the economic cost of migration contributes to difficulties in the households of 66% of the workers (Figure-12). Selling or mortgaging land contributes 31.91% of the economic cost of migration for 66% of the workers. 20.30% of the economic cost of migration is arranged by loans from moneylenders. These loans have a very high interest rate. Interest rates vary from worker to worker but in most cases the interest rates are 10% to 15% per month. To get the loan, sometimes workers mortgage gold ornaments, records of land property, and sometimes give signatures or thumbprints on blank papers. 16.39% of the cost of migration comes from loans from relatives and 31% comes from miscellaneous sources like selling cows, gold ornaments, paddy, and minor savings.

Table-6
Sources of Fund of the Workers for Migration to Singapore, 1998 (N=50)

Sources	Percent	Percentage of Migration Cost
External sources that is sponsored by relative in abroad	16	100
Family savings	18	100
Combined sources that is selling or mortgaging land(31.91%), loan from relatives (16.59), loan from money lenders(20.50) miscellaneous sources like selling livestock, gold ornaments, crops etc. (31%)	66	100
Total		

Missing Data = 0

Figure-12



A table has been given to present the total working months of the workers and patterns of payments of salary to workers (Table-7). There are inconsistencies between working months and total stay in Singapore. Most of the workers had to wait several months for work and they were not paid for non-working months. So it was economically unproductive time. I focused on the working months of workers only. Contracts of unskilled foreign workers are to last for two years and this contract is renewable for another two years. So workers hope to work for 4 years in total.

If we look at the data, we see workers worked in a range from 2 to 14 months only. 81.22% of the workers worked for only 2-7 months and the rest that is, 18.78% of the workers worked for 8-14 months. All of the workers had some money due to them from their employers at the time of the cancellation of their work permits and this ranged from 13.47% to 74% of their total salary. A worker was supposed to receive a total salary average S\$3,172.5 for his work. However he actually received a total salary average S\$1,971.07 for his work. The salary of a worker due by employers was on average S\$1,201.47. The percentage of the salary of a worker still due to them by employers was on average 37.87%.

A chart has been given to present the pattern of payment of salary to a worker according to his working months (Figure-13). The chart shows the salary a worker was supposed to receive, the salary a worker actually received, and the salary of a worker due by employers according to number of months worked by the time the work permit was cancelled.

Not all workers had completed full months of work. For example, three workers worked for 15 days of their final month and one worker for 22 days. In these cases, I had excluded the 15 days from the count, but included the 22 days as if it was one full month for the sake of convenience of calculation. With respect to the monthly salary of a worker, I also faced a problem for standard calculation. The basic salary for an unskilled construction worker varies from S\$13 to S\$18 or more per day, and overtime per hour of from S\$1 to S\$3. So for the convenience of calculation I took the salary of an unskilled construction worker at S\$540 per month.

Table-7
Total Working Months and the Status of Payment of Salary to Workers
At The Time of Cancellation of Work Permits
(N = 48, All Amounts in Sing \$. US\$ 1= S\$ 1.7)

Working Months	Frequency	Percent	Salary Workers Supposed to Receive for their working months	Salary Workers Actually Received	Salary Due to Employees	Percentages of Salary Due to Employees
(A)	(B)	(C)	(D*)	(E)	(F**)	(G***)
2	2	4.16	2,160	560	1,600	74.07
3	5	10.41	8,100	3,100	5,000	61.73
4	7	14.58	15,120	8,703.1	6,416.9	42.44
5	12	25	32,400	19,022.04	13,377.96	41.29
6	11	22.91	35,640	26,134.02	9,505.98	26.67
7	2	4.16	7,560	3,660	3,900	51.59
8	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	2	4.16	9,720	5,720	4,000	41.15
10	4	8.32	21,600	12,530	9,070	41.99
11	1	2.08	5,940	5,140	800	13.47
12	1	2.08	6,480	4,480	2,000	30.86
13	0	0	0	0	0	0
14	1	2.08	7,560	5,560	2,000	26.46
Total	48	100	152,280	94,609.16	57,670.84	

Missing Data = 2

NOTE

* $D = A \times B \times 540$ ****

** $F = D - E$

*** $G = \frac{F \times 100}{D}$

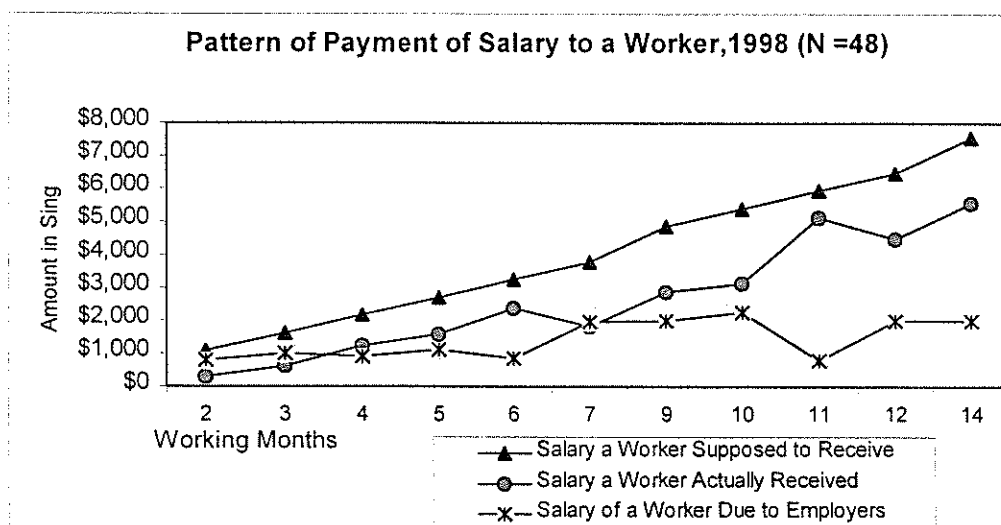
**** 540 is taken for granted as the standard salary of an unskilled construction worker.

Major Findings:

1. Each worker should have received a total salary of S\$ 3,172.5 (average per head) for his total working months in Singapore
 $[152,280 \div 48 = 3,172.5]$
2. Each worker actually received a total salary of S\$ 1,971.02 (average per head) for his total working months in Singapore.
 $[94,609.16 \div 48 = 1,971.02]$
3. The amount of salary of each worker left to employers was S\$ 1,201.47 (average per head) for his work in Singapore.
 $[57,670.84 \div 48 = 1,201.47]$
4. The percentage of their salary that was due to employees was 37.87% (average per head)

$$\frac{57670.84 \times 100}{152280} = 37.87\%$$
5. 81.22% of the workers worked for only 2- 7 months and the rest that is, 18.78% of the workers worked for 8-14 months

Figure-13



US\$ 1 = S\$ 1.7

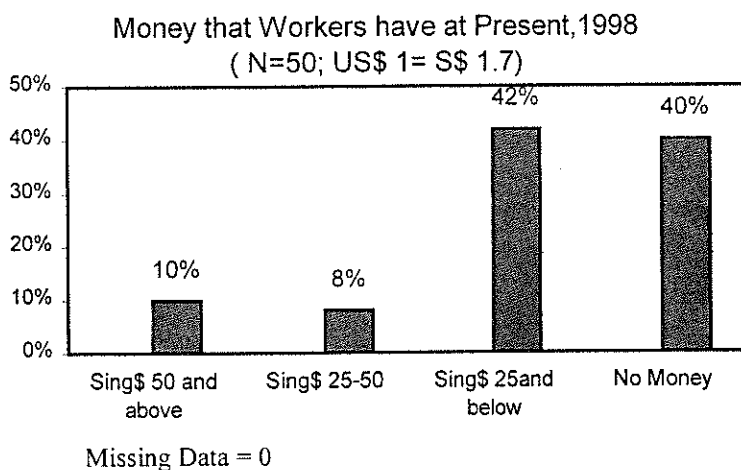
Note: The chart shows pattern of payment of salary to a worker according to the months.

Workers generally work from 8 AM to 5 PM. In some cases, workers of indirect employers work on Sundays like regular days without any overtime payment. However workers of direct employers enjoy all holidays. Some employers give free accommodation to workers and some charge for accommodation while the cost of food is borne by workers completely.

After the cancellation of work permits, most of the workers approached the Labor Relations Department, the Ministry of Manpower, Government of Singapore, to get their dues. This department assists employers and employees to resolve trade or employment/salary disputes amicably through conciliation with the view to promote harmonious labor management relations. At the time of writing my paper, I visited the houses of some workers. They informed me that they were very happy with the Labor Relations Department (LRD). This is because the LRD is very co-operative and helpful to workers to get their dues back.

Workers do not know when they are returning home. They are uncertain about their futures. Their departure depends on employers' co-operation to resolve the salary disputes. It also rests on returning workers' air tickets that were bought by workers themselves but were held by their employers after their arrival to Singapore. This uncertainty of departure led me to ask a different question. I asked them, "how much money do they have now"? They were very frank in disclosing the amounts (Figure-14).

Figure-14



40% of the workers had no money at the time of interview. They did not know what they would eat at their next meal. 42% of the workers had only S\$25 or below with them. 8% of the workers had S\$26 to S\$50 at their hand. And 10% of the workers had S\$50 or above at the time of interview.

I visited some workers' houses and saw about 40 to 50 workers living in a big room but having only one Latrine and one Bathroom. I did not inquire about their amount of loan in Singapore. But most of the workers told me that they borrowed money from their friends and relatives in Singapore. Bangladeshi workers gather at Serangoon road on Sundays. Serangoon road is the meeting place for Bangladeshi and Indian workers in Singapore. This gathering place allows these workers to approach relatives or friends for loans.

Why did these workers get their work permits cancelled? Work permits are cancelled if employers fail to pay the levy for workers. Employers need to pay a levy of S\$470 per month for a foreign unskilled construction worker. Some plausible reasons for being a defaulter of levy payment are given below.

1. Levy rates have constantly been increasing over the years from S\$ 140 in 1987 to S\$ 470 in 1999. Because of the increasing levy rates, some companies find it difficult to pay the levy.
2. Due to the current economic crisis, some companies do not have any more projects at hand. Thus they stop paying levies that automatically leads to the cancellation of work permits.
3. Companies may have projects going on presently but their main contractors/ clients have delayed payment for them. Thus they are always late in paying levies or they do not have the money to pay which leads to the default of levy payment
4. Sometimes companies complete the project before the fixed time by working day and night. This is because the payment for foreign workers is very cheap and they are not very strict about working hours and the amount of payment. Overworking of the workers helps the companies to complete the projects earlier. If these companies have no more projects, workers become a burden to them. Then companies stop paying the levy that leads to the cancellation of work permits.

5. Lastly some companies who have already profitted from the workers simply stop paying levy for a period of about three months, after which there is an automatic cancellation of the work permits.

All these are plausible factors for the cancellation of work permits and anyone of them could be the reason for not paying the levy. Workers believe that some employers particularly, 'Indirect Employers' are making a profit out of this economic crisis by not paying levies. Generally if employers do not pay levy for 3 months, work permits get cancelled. Workers believe that some employers profit in two ways. One way is by charging a large amount for work permits when they are at home. And the other is not paying levies for three months. The levy for three months is S\$1,410 for an unskilled foreign construction worker. In this way a few agents can profit about US\$ 4000 to 5,000 from each migrant worker. There are some agents who have several employment agencies in different names. Some workers think that such agents have imported hundreds of workers and exploited them in this way over the last few years. Such exploited workers are going back home with a negative impression of Singapore and this is because of the systematic exploitation of workers by a few employment agents.

Conclusion

The sad tale of Bangladeshi workers sketched here reveals aspects of exploitation, vulnerability and uncertainty. Their conditions have evoked sympathy from various quarters. Even Dr. Lee Boon Yang, Ministry for Manpower, Republic of Singapore, is sympathetic to the unskilled workers. His recent speech at the Parliament makes this clear.

"Unskilled foreign workers are the ones most vulnerable to abuses and malpractice. We are aware of labor suppliers who collude with contractors to cheat ignorant and unskilled foreign workers. These workers had paid agents in their home countries large fees on the promises of well-paying jobs in Singapore. Some end up abandoned without a job and accommodation shortly after they arrive in Singapore. We have already taken various measures such as the introduction of the levy bond early this year and new allocation formula, to stem such abuses"
(At parliament on 25 November 1998, Singapore)

The dilemmas of labor migration came into sharper focus when the Asian economic crisis hit Southeast and East Asia. With the advent of the crisis most of the labor importing countries of Asia started a mass deportation of foreign workers that caused a lot of miseries and maltreatment of migrant workers in this region. However, the experience of foreign workers in Singapore is different from other countries of the region. There is no mass deportation of foreign workers. The problems and prospects of foreign workers always receive considerable coverage by local media. Foreign workers often receive love and sympathy from the locals. There are a number of Singaporeans who take care of workers by giving food and money at this hard time. I came to know about a Chinese old man who regularly distributes food to workers whose work permits were cancelled. But unfortunately he took his last breath in December 1998. He hid his identity to workers so I still do not know his name and address. However the kindness of Singaporeans did not stop with the death of that kind old man. I came to know that now his daughter visits workers' houses all of a sudden and distributes food to such workers. The story of these two unknown Singaporeans is a part of the leisure talks of workers all over Singapore.

The problems of these workers are rooted at home. If we look into the decision-making process of workers from the perspective of neo-classical micro economic theory of migration, the picture will be clear. The main theme of this theory is that individuals as rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return, usually monetary. Potential migrants estimate the costs and benefits of moving to alternative international locations and migrate to where the expected discounted net returns are greatest over a period of time (Borjas, 1990).

The migration of Bangladeshi workers at the time of the crisis was not a rational action from this theoretical point of view. It reflects that middlemen networks in Bangladesh are very successful in promoting dreams of fortune to potential migrants who have little hope of increasing their wealth locally. The success of middlemen is attributable to the block of conduits of information to rural Bangladesh.

The socio-economic constraints that make these workers vulnerable to exploitation, can not be weeded out only by the attempt of the host country. There is a need of co-operation and co-ordination between host and guest countries particularly at the era of present globalization and information revolution.

Last but not least, in spite of the economic crisis, Singapore is a host to 450,000 foreign workers and their stories are more or less the stories of success and triumph. Foreign workers in Singapore enjoy a cosmopolitan atmosphere that is conducive to the investment of the best of their talents and labors. A recent report published by PERC, The Hong Kong-based political and Economic Risk Constancy, supports this standpoint. This report says that Singapore is one of the most open countries to foreigners and its leaders are the least susceptible to nationalistic pressures. Titled "Nationalism As A Threat", the report noted that the most nationalistic country is South Korea, followed by India, Vietnam, China and a few other Asian countries (The Straits Times, February 22, 1999). Therefore it is not surprising that Singapore remains a sought after destination for migrant workers.

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