



BANGLADESHI MUSLIM CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN SINGAPORE: A STUDY IN THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Sanghita Datta

*Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India
e-mail: sanghitadatta@gmail.com*

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Abstract

Singapore has a long history of receiving labor migrants from all across South Asia and it has systematically developed a whole range of strategies to deal with the shortage of labourers in the country. Recent research has shown that to fulfill these shortages, large numbers of labourers are hired from Bangladesh Muslim. These labourers are temporary migrants and work in various construction sites in the country. Using field research (unstructured interviews and purposive sampling) as the chief method, with supporting secondary data from library research newspaper archives and internet, this research focuses on Bangladesh's migrant workers in Singapore specifically working in the construction sites. It will look at what goes into the decision making or the choice of a certain foreign country over the other and the role of the family in the decision making process. Understanding the process of socialization among these migrants and how they try to bridge the gaps between their home and the foreign work place by creating a home away from home, will also be highlighted.

Keywords: *Bangladeshi Muslim, Construction Workers, Migrant*

Abstrak

Singapura memiliki sejarah panjang menerima tenaga kerja migran dari seluruh Asia Selatan dan telah sistematis mengembangkan berbagai macam strategi untuk menghadapi kekurangan buruh di negara ini. Penelitian terbaru menunjukkan bahwa untuk memenuhi kekurangan tersebut, sejumlah besar buruh dipekerjakan dari Bangladesh Muslim. Para buruh ini merupakan migran sementara dan mereka bekerja di berbagai konstruksi di negara ini. Dengan menggunakan penelitian lapangan (wawancara terstruktur dan *purposive sampling*) sebagai metode utama, dengan didukung oleh data sekunder dari perpustakaan, arsip, koran, penelitian, dan internet, penelitian ini berfokus pada pekerja migran Bangladesh di Singapura secara khusus bekerja di lokasi konstruksi. Penelitian ini akan melihat apa yang terjadi dalam pengambilan keputusan atau pilihan dari negara asing tertentu atas yang lain dan peran keluarga dalam proses pengambilan keputusan. Memahami proses sosialisasi di antara para migran dan bagaimana mereka mencoba untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara keluarga dan tempat kerja asing dengan menciptakan suasana seperti di rumah sendiri meskipun mereka jauh dari rumah juga akan disorot.

Kata Kunci: *Muslim Bangladesh, Pekerja Konstruksi, Migran*

Introduction

Singapore has a long history of receiving labor migrants from all across South Asia and it has systematically developed a whole range of strategies to deal with the shortage of laborers in the country. Recent research has shown that to fulfill these shortages, large numbers of labourers are hired from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand. These labourers are temporary migrants and engaged in various low profile jobs. Immigration of labour across international border is very common from under countries which have significant surplus labour. The country with the immigrant labour also gets benefitted by fulfilling their human resource demands. These

migrants not only boost the domestic economy directly but also play a vital role in training the local workforce.

Importing cheap labour from foreign countries is a lucrative business for agencies in Singapore. The shipyard business, construction business and domestic workers are the main areas where generally the agencies recruit. In this particular paper I would like to draw your attention to the Bangladeshi workers who are generally employed in the construction business. According to The Strait Times article published on 23rd February, 2010, Francis Chan mentioned that over thirty percent of Singapore's workforce is made up of foreigners, with a large



majority being migrants in low- wage occupations. In December 2009, official statistics show that there were 856,000 foreigners engaged in low skilled or semi-skilled manual jobs¹.

Migrant workers has been a part of Singapore's economy since 1960's when the country faced an acute shortage of workers as the local workforce was no longer adequate for the economy. The important role played by the low wage migrant workers in the economy of Singapore is acknowledged by Singapore's Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong's May Day message in 2008-

"First, foreign workers are hardworking and willing to work long hours. By hiring them, coffee shops can open late, or even 24 hours, round the clock. Second and more importantly, with the help of foreign workers, airport, seaport, factories, offices, hotels, restaurants and retail outlets can offer better service and business hours: 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, they can run their operations, service their customers, and so strengthen Singapore's overall competitiveness. Third, many SMEs do not make good profits, especially the neighborhood shops. If they can hire some foreign workers in addition to the locals, they can reduce their business costs; otherwise, they may have to go out of business. Their Singaporean employees will then lose their jobs."

Even with their significant contribution to the economic development of Singapore, they live in harsh condition and earn a bare minimum salary. They are also the first one to be hit by an economic crisis as they are the flexible component of the workforce. This study limits itself to the Bangladeshi construction workers and will bring in their present state as well as the problems faced by them.

Approaches to Labour Migration

The question of 'why people migrate' is central to the migration theories. To gain a better understanding of migration nexus, there is a need to go through some of the theoretical debates that goes behind the entire process of migration. The historical framework reveals the different

¹ Francis Chan, 'Foreign worker levy to increase over 3 years', *The Straits Times*, February 23, 2010

patterns of movement of people across the geographical locations. The theorists related the process of migration with various socio-economic relations and population aggregates in a particular geographical area. The structural school, on the other hand, tried to connect the process of migration with political mechanism of power and domination. Theoretically it tried to connect it to the larger question of underdevelopment, dependency theory, central- periphery theory, world systems theory and uneven development. In brief the analysis focused on the impact of migration on the national economy.

In the wake of global capitalism, unequal distributions of power give rise to inequalities across nations which strengthen inequalities which in turn provokes migration. For example, Samir Amin in his dependency theory explains how poor countries are trapped in an unequal geopolitical structure by their disadvantaged position, which perpetuate their poverty and in turn creates 'a reserve army of cheap labor'. Rather than experiencing a progression towards modernization, he views labour migration as detrimental for the sending countries.

On the other hand, Immanuel Wallerstein reconstructed the historical process by which unequal economic and political structures were created and divided the countries in accordance with their dependency on the 'core' nations. The 'peripheral' nations were the most dependent, 'semi-peripheral' countries were somewhat wealthier and the 'core' nations were the dominant capitalist powers². This theory is also known as the 'world systems theory'. This theory is of the view that the penetration of capitalist economic relations into non-capitalist or pre-capitalist societies creates a mobile population that is prone to migrate.

Another framework tries to relate international migration with that of 'power' and 'prestige' in a society. In essence, international migration constitutes an 'interaction between societal systems geared to transfer tensions and thus balancing power and prestige'. In a social system, power and prestige are determined by the positions and the status attributed to the positions. Tensions arise with the inequalities and status inconsistencies in the emigration countries. Actions to resolve these tensions which generate

² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750*, (Academic Press, 1980) p. 20.



imbalance between power and status, gives way to such forms like social mobility, giving up the social position held, or emigration to a country where status aspirations can be attained.

The neo-classical theories have dominated the migration studies for many years. Initially it was developed to explain the internal labor migration and how it contributes towards the economic development. But later on it shifted its attention towards international migration and assumes that the difference in wage is one of the chief determinants to stir the movement of people. It further assumes that due to migration in the high wage country, the wages will fall, while the wage in low wage country will rise, leading to equilibrium in international wage differentials. International migration is caused by geographic differences in supply of and demand for labor³.

But the neoclassical microeconomic model of individual choice views international migration as a sum of individual cost benefits decisions undertaken to maximize expected income through international movement⁴. Even the Target income theory adopts the neo classical theory to explain temporary labor migration by emphasizing on the push-pull factors and individual cost-benefit analysis but relaxes the assumption of lifetime income maximization. According to this theory, the migrant enters the labor market as target earners and after achieving the savings target, will return back to the native place. But recent studies have also shown that it is not true in many cases. Straubhaar criticizes this model for not taking into account the other motives that influences the migrant's decision making process like the real income difference between home and abroad. For example the case of Bangladeshi labour migrants in Singapore.

The expenditure of entering into Singapore is huge but still migrants flock towards it as the cost can equalize or exceed the benefits of migration abroad. Moreover the theory also predicts that international migration will decrease when the earning between two countries shrink or the host country is in economic crisis. Despite the 1997 Asian financial crisis, movement of Bangladeshi

migrants did not shrink over time. The above discussion shows that economic factor is directly linked to the entire process of migration. Economically less developed country generally sends the work force to the economically sound countries. The importance of power and prestige also occupies a major place. People move out of the country for better livelihood prospect. At times a political turmoil can also lead to a situation of mass migration. When the political situation is strained for a long time in a particular country, people start looking for better prospect abroad. Like the other poor developed country, the case of Bangladeshi migrants moving out of the country is linked to both economic as well as political reasons.

Methodology

The primary data sources for this study include extensive interviews with 70 Bangladeshi migrants for a period of 5 weeks. All the respondents were male and were currently working in some or the other construction sites as a laborer. The interviews provided qualitative information on the following eight key areas: respondents profile, how they secured employment in Singapore, their experiences living here, problems faced at the workplace, their awareness on the friendly policies on MOM, and the health benefits gained by them, living conditions, their social life

The interviews were open ended but were organized around the key eight concerns. The interviews were done in the native language i.e. Bengali and are audio taped for better understanding. The respondents were randomly selected on the basis of their willingness to give the interview. The respondents were asked to sign the participant consent form. All the interviews were done in the Farrer Park region and in Desker Road (near Mustafa). Migrant domestic workers and the migrant workers working in shipyard business were exempted from the study. The sample size was fixed to 70 due to the constraints of time but it yielded interesting insights into how the research participants met their basic needs of food, shelter, money and medical help while pursuing a job.

For the secondary data the media releases, the information and news published on website of MOM and in The Strait Times. Information on the migrants was gathered from the website of HOME and TWC2. For the purpose of

³ Todaro and Maruszko, Todaro MP, Maruszki L., 'Illegal Migration and US Immigration Reform: A Conceptual Framework', (Population and development review, 1987), 13:101-14

⁴ Todaro MP, 'A model of labor migration and urban unemployment in less-developed countries', (American Economic Review, 1969), 59:138-48.



reviewing of literature, I have taken into account various articles from different journals. And to contextualize the entire scenario various theories of labour migration have been taken into account

Decision Making

The recent theories of labour migration theory suggest that it is the family, as a unit, which is behind the decision making unit and not the individual, as it was thought earlier. It emphasizes on the fact that international migration is seen as a strategy for risk minimization and capital accumulation. It brings together migrants decision making with migrants remittance behavior. This also explains the case of Bangladeshi Migrants. Even in the midst of huge financial costs involve in the migration procedures, hectic working conditions and low income returns, a section of rural population is desperate to migrate overseas in search of a better life.

The idea of having a better and brighter future abroad is seen when they see success stories in their neighborhood or in someone's own family member. Mostly people are comfortable in migrating to a place where they can find someone whom they knew.

"My cousin brother came to Singapore for work. He did a course and got a job here. So I wanted to come here in Singapore. I have seen my neighbor's eldest son coming here and making a lot of money which he used to send home. With the money they were able to build new house. I thought I have to do the same for my family so I came here. I have seen many people from my village coming here in Singapore so I took the inspiration from them. So I borrowed money and came here. I am not so good in studies and so I left studies after 10th standard. With that level of education I will not be able to get a good job in Bangladesh. But I can get a good salary in Singapore as the work I do doesn't consider my educational background. I can make more money than an educated person back home. So why not come to Singapore".

In this desperation, hefty loans are taken, lands are sold. In the decision making process, family plays an important role. The family background as well as the harsh conditions

of poverty, scarcity of well-paid jobs plays the major role. Generally the respondents were from poor economic background. This conclusion has been drawn on the basis of the fact that all the respondents have borrowed money from some or the other sources and in few cases they have sold land as well. Mostly the respondents had a low level of education, 64 of the 70 respondents were educated till secondary school. One of them was lucky enough to finish his college successfully and three of them were able to complete their higher secondary. Two respondents were finding it difficult to write their name as they attended only primary school. But their conditions improved when they started sending money back home. All of them were proud of the fact that they are able to send more money than an educated person holding a job in Bangladesh can do

The Middle Man

For coming to Singapore the Bangladeshi Construction workers have to undertake an exam which will certify them as a skilled labour. To sit for the exam they generally undertake a course in the kind of work they are interested in a specific institute. These institutes are scattered all over the country and provides them with the certificate as well as job. To gain legitimate entry for the purpose of work, migrant workers must be sponsored by a legal employer who actually applies for a work permit for them under the work pass system. The rules are very strict for both the employers as well as the workers. The sole intention for this is to maximize the economic benefits of the country. The agencies through which they pass their exam, generally act as mediators between the worker and the Singaporean agent which will ultimately provide them with a job. The migrants generally pursue a certificate course in the following areas: SR (Steel Enforce bar), Timber, Water proofing, Metal framework, Painting, Welding, Ceiling Partition-Fiber, Pipe fitting/ Plumbing, Rod Casting, Dry Wall. But the nature of the job can be different from that of the certificate course. The certificate course serves only as the benchmark to qualify to get a job in the construction work in Singapore. The recruitment is generally done on the basis of the work needed. It has nothing to do with the certificate course.

"I have done my course in SR but I work as a welding worker. It doesn't make any difference on what you do



your certificate. You just need it to work as a skilled worker in Singapore”.

Still a lot of money is spent on the course. Generally money is taken from them on account of the certificate course, one time air fare to come to Singapore and also getting employment. Thus entire cost of coming to Singapore can be anything between S\$5000 to S\$15000. The table below shows the amount of money paid to the agents:-

Table. 1 Nationality and Agent Fees

Nationality	Agent Fees
Indian	S\$6,000 - S\$7,000
Bangladeshi	S\$8,000 - S\$10,000
Chinese	For construction workers, the fees range from S\$3,000 to S\$7,000; for service sector workers, it may range from S\$8,000 to S\$10,000.

Employment of Foreign Manpower (Work Passes) Regulations: Fourth Schedule, Part III, paragraph 10, on page 29 says:

“The employer shall not demand or receive any sum or other benefit from an employment agency or any other person in connection with the employment or change in employment of a foreign employee”.

This is reinforced by the ministry in its FAQ sheet, where it says:

“Collection of monies from foreign workers as consideration for employment (i.e. employment kickbacks) is an offence liable to a maximum fine of \$30,000 and/or an maximum imprisonment term of 24 months; Employers that illegally recover employment costs from foreign workers e.g. levy, security bond, medical insurance costs etc is an administrative infringement, with a maximum administrative penalty of \$20,000”.

Even Employment Agencies act prohibits employment agencies from charging job seekers. They cannot charge more than 10% of their first month’s salary and S\$ 5 registration fees. But for hiring agencies, the process of hiring itself is a big business. All the respondents have paid a huge sum of money to be in Singapore. But even

after receiving large sums of money, interviewees show that the employment agencies do little to represent the interests of workers.

Moreover the Singaporean government also charges a monthly foreign worker levy for every legal migrant worker under their employment and imposes a quota on the number of migrant worker that a company is allowed to hire. This levy and quota differs according to the skill level and work pass. This levy is generally deducted from the worker’s salary sometimes every month or sometimes in the beginning of first three months.

“The government charges us a levy which is very huge. The company deducts it from my salary so my monthly income initially was very low”.My employer also deducts the levy from me. They say it is a tax that we have to pay to the government. So I didn’t said anything and anyways I don’t want to lose the job by not paying”

The main problem with the middle man is that they don’t exist on papers so it is very difficult to catch hold of them. The irony of the situation is that everyone knows that they exist but they cannot be harmed.

Working In Singapore

The nature of employment doesn’t take into account the course that the workers have pursued back home. Workers are recruited on the basis of the vacancies in a given company. The course that these workers needed to pass to come to Singapore is a hoax. They can be assigned to do any kind of work.

“They don’t care about our health if we can do the assigned job perfectly or not. Generally the jobs are assigned on the basis of the structure of the body. If you are little healthy then they will make you work and will give you the difficult job of lifting heavy things. But if you are thin, they will give you some other job.

They generally work 8.am to 5.pm but are often asked to do overtime. At times the workers are paid for their overtime and at times they are not. The workers are paid S\$2- S\$5 per hour as overtime. The overtime generally runs more than 72 hours per month.

“My company pays S\$2 per hour as over time. It doesn’t give any other extr money if we work on Saturdays



and Sundays. My company doesn't give me any extra money to work on the weekends. It gives me the daily wage even for the weekend".

The employers are supposed to pay one and half percent extra as per hour overtime and on Sundays, they are supposed to pay double but it never happens. The workers are forced to work extra hour but are not paid. The fear of losing one's job is a perpetual dilemma which is a part of the migrant's life in Singapore. If an employee is unhappy with the job, he is forced to continue with it as they are not allowed to switch jobs. According to Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, it prohibits the foreign workers to switch their job even if they are not happy with it. Only Construction workers and domestic workers are allowed to switch their jobs. But finding a better job is very tricky as the employers generally have the migrant's passport as well as the contract papers.

"My passport and contract papers are with the company. They don't give it to us. I am not aware what exactly I have to do if I want to change my job. My papers and documents including my passport is with the company. As I have a cordial relationship with my Foreman, so he has given me a Xerox copy of it. I cannot travel out of the country without the permission from my company people".

But for the other migrants like the migrants working in the shipyard business, switching a job is a costly affair as it urges for fresh application from the migrant worker and has to return to their native country and have to pay the agents again for providing them with a job. The ease with which an employer can terminate a migrant workers employment makes them more vulnerable to unjust dismissals.

Returning home empty handed is also something that is looked down upon. The entire family looks forward to gain something from sending one family member so that they all can have a decent future. But when the worker fails to deliver they are looked down upon. This is one of the main reasons why the workers go to visit their family once in two- three years.

"When I go back home, people expect a lot from me. Even if I don't buy anything for myself, I have to buy

something as a small gift for my family members. I cannot go home empty handed and Singapore is so costly. They have spent so much money to send me here so I have to live up to their expectation. Even if I have problem at my workplace I keep quite thinking about my family back home. They have so many expectations and being the eldest son in the family, I have to fulfill them"

The fear of deporting back to the country empty handed prevents the workers to raise voice against the wrong doings at the workplace. The employer is fully aware of this dilemma and exploits them fully

Living Condition

Construction workers generally stay in dormitories, company accommodation and in containers. Dormitories and company accommodation can be anywhere in Singapore and mostly when the work place shifts, the workers are also shifted to a different place. So they don't have any fixed place to stay. When the job on one site gets over they pack up and they move to the new site again.

"Right now I am staying in a dormitory. But I don't know how long I will be able to stay here. When the work sites change, the employers ask us to move as well".

Some of the dormitories are regularly visited by officials from the ministry. So 15 of the respondents are happy staying in the dormitories. But there are others who are not very lucky. The dormitories they live don't have proper sanitary facilities.

"I stay in a dormitory and the toilets are not clean. Leave the toilet the condition of the room is also not good. We are so many living together at one place that we can barely manage. The fan also doesn't work. We have to buy our own fan. In my dormitory there is no cooking facility so I am forced to eat in the catering. The food they serve is bad and at times doesn't suit me as well. But there is no way out. At least the catering food will be cheaper than if I eat outside".

A day in the construction workers life starts very early. They have to report on duty by 8am. If they are staying in onsite containers then they have little extra time to sleep but if they are staying in dormitories or in company accommodation



then they have to start very early in the morning for work. And as some of the migrants eat self-cooked food, so when they return from work it is already late night, and after cooking and eating when they go to sleep its very late. And again they have to start very early in the morning as they have to be on time. The workers remain sleep deprived even after working hard.

The government faces a lot of hardship in imposing strict rules for regulating the over timing. As there will be some workers who will like to work overtime to earn extra money so that they can save more money and sent them home. So finding a solution to regulate the timing and working hours is very difficult.

Sending Money Home

The construction workers try to save as much they can to send back home. From the survey it can be concluded that the workers are able to send 20000/- to 80000/- Bangladeshi taka per month back home. They send it through the banks like Islami Bank of Bangladesh. But at times they also send money via 'hundies'. Hundies are people whom the workers trust to transfer money safely to home. A hundi can be someone among themselves who has the mean to transfer cash directly to the workers family without any bank. This is like an open market but is risky at times.

Loopholes

The inflexible work pass leaves workers with no choice of bargaining for better lucrative jobs which will be able to pay them better. If the migrant is not happy with their current jobs they are unable to make a switch to a different company. If they want to switch then they have to go back to Bangladesh and have to undergo the same process again. This is a very costly affair as even after coming to Singapore for the second time the workers need to pay almost the same amount they paid earlier. 99% of the migrants from the study have shown that they have paid a huge sum again to come to Singapore. 65 out of 70 migrants have said that their basic got increased by S\$ 2 when they came for the second time.

Policies of Mom

Ministry of Manpower oversees Singapore's labour needs as well as the rights of workers. Its Foreign Manpower Management overlooks the Singapore's foreign workforce policies and helps in enhancing the standard of migrant workers. It

works closely with Work Pass Division (WPD), Occupational Safety and Health Division (OSHD), Labour Relations and Workplaces Division (LRWD) and the Workplace Policy and Strategy Department (WPSD). Some of the important Acts laid down by the government are as follows:-

Employment Act is the main labour legislation in Singapore. It lays down the terms and conditions of employment for example hours of work, medical leave, annual leave and rest days. It doesn't differentiate between the local workers and the foreign workers who are classified as workmen. According to Employment Act (Chapter 91 of Singapore, part1, section -2) it defines workmen is an employee who is; Any person, skilled or unskilled, doing manual work, including any artisan or apprentice but excluding any seaman or domestic worker; Any person, other than clerical staff, employed in the operation or maintenance of mechanically propelled vehicles that transport passengers, for hire or commercial purposes; Any person employed to supervise any workman and perform manual work. However, this is subject to the requirement that the time spent on manual work must be more than half of the total working time in a salary period; or Any person specified in the First Schedule of the Employment Act, namely cleaners; construction workers; laborers; machine operators and assemblers; metal and machinery workers; train, bus, lorry and van drivers; train and bus inspectors; and all workmen employed on piece rates at the employer's premises.

Employment of Foreign Manpower Act lays down the hiring process of a foreign migrant's work permit. It also mentions the responsibilities of the employers toward the maintenance and wellbeing of the migrant workers. It lays down the rules for mandatory health checkups; restriction on marriage; reproductive rights and prohibition of immoral activities are also established.

Work Injury Compensation Act regulates the compensation paid by the employers to the migrants in case of injury during the course of work. This act provides a very low compensation for workers who sustain injuries or have died in a mishap while working. The employees can also claim compensation in case of the contacting an occupational disease arising in course of their employment. The Work Injury Compensation Department of MOM is responsible for the investigations and awarding the claims.



Employment Agencies Act regulates the placement of workers by the private employment agencies which also include the migrant workers. The licensing condition stipulates the conditions of recruitment procedure and workers wellbeing and repatriation issues. It also has the power to hold employment agencies accountable for unethical practices. When they see a fellow worker being manhandled, they are generally reluctant to lodge a formal complaint as they fear that they will lose the job.

“Even if I want to stand by the side of my friend, I am unable to do so because I know that I will be dismissed from my job. I have a family back home. I have to send them money. I have other responsibilities. What will I do in Singapore without a job? I feel bad but I am helpless”.

Some employers even hire men from ‘repatriation companies’ who use gangster like means to intimidate the workers forcefully. If someone picks up a fight with the supervisor or are unable to work properly due to health issues they are packed off and send to the airport directly.

“My friend has suffered in the hands of the gangster. He had a small fight with the supervisor and was send to his room in the dormitory. But when I returned in the night I couldn’t find him. His clothes and other things were still there in the room. Two days later he called me and told me that he was send to the airport directly and was send back to Bangladesh. The employers didn’t even pay him any money for the month. He was working here for the last seven months”.

This was not the only incident that was reported but when asked in general, people echoed the same concern

“Nobody cares if you are happy or not, the only thing the company care is about the amount of work you do. You are paid because of the work and they are not here to look at any other things. If you protest, you lose the job. If you take side of your friend who has been manhandled, you lose the job. Now tell me who would protest in such a scenario”.

Sometimes the gangster forces the worker to take back the complaint as well by creating

pressure on them

“My friend took complain back as the gangster was after him. He had been threatened on several occasions. So he took complain back and have now settle with the same job. There is no other way out for us. We are poor people”.

When formal complaints are lodged the workers have to wait for a long time for the court to settle the matter. During this process the workers are issued special passes so that they can remain in Singapore. But this special pass doesn’t allow them to work leaving them bereft of any income. Apart from living without a proper job, the workers face difficulties in understanding the court proceedings. The court process is not only lengthy but it is also very expensive.

Under the Employment Act, both the employee and the employer are free to terminate the contract of the service. They can do so by giving a notice or by paying salary in lieu as agreed upon the contract. In the absence of a proper contract, the period of notice is as follows:-

Table 2. Minimum Period of Notice

Length of Employment	Period of Notice
Less than 26 weeks	1 Day
26 Weeks to 2 Years	1 Week
2 years to less than 5 years	2 Weeks
5 years and more	4 Weeks

Further the employer can terminate the contract without even a prior notice. This can be done as the work permits can be canceled unilaterally by the employer. This procedure is very swift and takes only a single day. These little gaps in the law make the workers more vulnerable. Moreover the migrant workers are not allowed to switch employers and are not allowed to apply for dependent passes for their spouse and children.

“Even if I have a problem with my employer, I am helpless. If I want a new job, I have to go back to Bangladesh and again have to find a good agent who will be able to put me in a job. If I know someone who will be able to help me in finding a new job, then also I have to return to Bangladesh and start afresh. And once you return back, it can be very risky. You never know the person whom you are trusting so much, has the power actually to break your trust. So it’s very tricky”.



Knowing the fact the poor construction workers are dependent on the employers for their bread and butter, some employers even use different forms of abuses. The abuse can be verbal as well as physical. 14 of the respondents have reported that they faced some or the other kind of verbal abuse in the workplace. The verbal abuses generally arise when there is delay in completing the job.

“When I am working the supervisor will call me every 15min to know if I am done with the job or not.....you tell me where I should concentrate... on the job or picking up his phone? If I don't pick up his phone he uses bad words. He also has to understand that the kind of job I do involves a lot of risks. But he is not bothered. He knows if I am not there then he can find a replacement easily. So I don't have a choice. We are supposed to have a break of one hour minimum for our lunch. But he never gives us that much amount of time. As soon as we are done with the lunch we have to get back to work immediately otherwise he will use bad words and fowl language. Are we not human beings?”

Many of the respondents hesitated in telling me if they suffer any physical abuses but still 5 of the respondents have reported about the physical abuses. But one of them told me a very curious way of hitting someone:-

“If they hit us by the helmet then we don't have proof. Like I am wearing a helmet when I am working and then if the supervisor is not happy with the speed of my work, he will come and hit me with his own helmet. Hitting someone with the helmet is also a crime and it is very difficult to prove in front of MOM. When you are hit you definitely get hurt but how do you prove this that you didn't get hurt while working and it was a deliberate act. MOM only understands proofs”.

The physical abuse is not restricted to the foreman or the supervisor having a tiff with the workers. They even instigate the other workers of different nationality to break out into a fight. For example the few Bangladeshi workers can have a fight with the Tamil workers from India. This is a common practice as reported by the respondents.

“If your foreman is not happy with your work, he will ask the Tamils, Chinese to beat you up. It is all stage. They will pick up a fight with you and then beat you”.

These instances show how vulnerable the construction workers are. Even if MOM tries to bring rigid laws, the employers are smart enough to manipulate the laws and find a way out. 68 out of 70 workers echoed the fact that MOM does try to help them out but it is the agent and the smart employers who always find an other way round for the situation. Further the premature termination of a contract is a great loss for the workers.

Health Benefits

The companies do promise to provide the medical facilities. But it is very rare that some people actually receive the medical care that is due to them. The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act also mentions that the employers are responsible for the medical cover if the injuries are sustained at work. The worker is supposed to receive the medical cover fully with extended treatment and leave from work till he recovers fully. But this is a distant dream. The workers had to pay full or partial costs of their medical treatments.

“When I felt sick, I went to the doctor that the company prescribed but it was not helpful. So I went to another doctor with my own expense and with the help of his medicine, I was better. My company doesn't give me any medical facilities. If I am sick, I have to bear my own expenses”.

Deduction from the worker's salary is a common practice with the employer even though it is not allowed under the Employment Act. The Employment Act (Chapter 91), Part III, Section 27 (1). This provision states that authorized deductions are; deductions for absence from work; deductions for damage to or loss of goods expressly entrusted to an employee for custody or for loss of money for which an employee is required to account, where the damage or loss is directly attributable to his neglect or default; deductions for the actual cost of meals supplied by the employer at the request of the employee; deductions for house accommodation supplied by the employer; deductions for such amenities and services supplied by the employer as the



Commissioner may authorize; deductions for recovery of advances or loans or for adjustment of over-payments of salary; deductions for income tax payable by the employee; deductions of contributions payable by an employer on behalf of an employee under and in accordance with the provisions of the Central Provident Fund Act (Cap. 36); deductions made at the request of the employee for the purpose of a superannuation scheme or provident fund or any other scheme which is lawfully established for the benefit of the employee and is approved by the Commissioner; deductions made with the written consent of the employee and paid by the employer to any co-operative society registered under any written law for the time being in force in respect of subscriptions, entrance fees, installments of loans, interest and other dues payable by the employee to such society; and from time to time by the Minister

There have been many instances where the money was deducted from the workers monthly salary.

“My company doesn’t pay more than S\$18 as my medical fee. Doctors in Singapore are so costly. But what to do if you are sick you will visit a doctor. So I ended up paying it from my own. Initially my company said they will give my medical expense but when I submitted the bills, they said it exceeded the amount that the company is supposed to pay so they didn’t pay me any money. I thought my company is better because it paid me my whole medical expense. But later on I realized they have deducted it from my salary”.

In a joint report by the HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics) and TWC2 (Transient Workers Count too) the minimum amount of compulsory hospitalization insurance coverage for all migrant workers was increased to S\$5000 to S\$ 15000. In early 2009, a task force was established to direct companies who were in financial difficulties and unable to pay workers. Employers also stand to lose a S4 5000 security bond for every migrant worker under their employment should they fail to pay them on time.

Even with these strict detailed laws in effect, the scene from the other side is very different. The workers who lodges complain against their employer for not getting the medical facilities,

they suffer the most. At times they have to pay for their entire medical fees as well as get terminated from the job as they have lodged a complaint. So they find it difficult to meet up both the expenses.

Conclusion

Migration is a way out for a better livelihood for many third world countries. The rich country’s policies take advantage of the economically weak countries where migration is necessary in order to improve their condition as well as livelihoods. The recruitment process in Singapore, like other countries, is dominated by the private companies. So in hope for a better future, they sell everything whatever they have, to come to Singapore.

The government has prosecuted many employers for failing to pay the workers promptly, deploying them illegally to multiple work sites and ignoring safety regulations. It has also taken an initiative to educate the migrant workers about their basic rights through their orientation courses, public education posters and handbooks. In spite of these measures government is yet to reach to a large number of migrants. In the case of the Bangladeshi Construction workers, these help has not yet reached them. Even though they agree that MOM is very helpful and is worker friendly but still the companies find their own way out.

Even though Singapore government has put forward strong legislation to make the country a safe place for foreign migrant worker but still more efforts are needed to reach out to the migrants directly. Singapore has made its way by ensuring the migrant workers have access to redress but the entire process of lodging a complaint and getting justice can be shortened. An effective public education should be made mandatory so that the new migrants are aware of the laws and the employers are made aware of the fair employment practices. One has to understand that when the workers feel protected, it will lead to their better performance.

The process of migration is like a vicious circle. It starts with the migrant worker borrowing a loan from wherever it is possible to pay to the agents and to the institution to get the degree. This is the first step. The net is his ordeal to find a job in a foreign country. Once this stage is successfully done, they land in the foreign country with big dreams of making a lot of money. Little do they realize that for earning money they have

to work like cats and dogs, get used to the abuses and the physical torcher and mental agony. Then at first they try to pay back the loan taken from different sources and then they start sending money home only to realize that when their work permit gets over, they have to again take loan to pay the agents to get a job. This is like a spider's web where there is no way to get out of it. Still people migrate out of desperation, out of poverty languishing for a better job and secured life

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