

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis dealt with Bangladeshi temporary migrant workers in Singapore. This research examined the rationality of migration and explained some other relevant issues related to Bangladeshi labor migration to Singapore, for instance, the social organization of migration, the circumstances in which foreign workers work and live in Singapore, the costs and benefits of migration from the migrants' viewpoint and the effects of emigration on the migrants and their families. It attempted a comprehensive analysis of Bangladeshi labor migration by pursuing a two-end approach - the sending and destination ends. This concluding chapter will describe the major findings of the dissertation, reappraise the labor migration theories, and introduce future research areas.

In Chapter Two, I developed an integrated theoretical framework to explain rationality, social processes and effects of migration. To explain the rationality of migration, this thesis called for a consideration of the social and cultural contexts within which the migration decision is made. I argued that it would be insufficient to examine migration decision-making in terms of the neoclassical economic theories, which "assume rational, self-interested behavior affected minimally by social relations" (Granovetter, 1985:481). I argued that much of the utilitarian tradition does not adequately consider (a) the role of the

group (family, lineage) and (b) the role of socio-cultural factors in their theoretical propositions. An expanded concept of rational choice constitutes a logical and plausible alternative to utilitarian rational choice model. This broader model incorporates economic and non-economic variables. This study analyzed the ways in which migration decisions were constituted through various noneconomic forces, for instances, beliefs and values, culture of honor, status, relative status, and resources available in social and symbolic ties.

The family is enormously important in Bangladeshi society. Although almost all migrant workers move overseas as individuals, I argued that the actual decision-making process often involved the family and lineage and the migrant viewed his trip not for his own well-being but also for the well-being of his whole family and lineage. Hence trust, reciprocity, obligations and solidarity are relevant in migration decision-making. One important trend in labor migration is that a few selected districts in Bangladesh were the main source of migrants to Singapore. In order to explain this variability in the composition of migrant flows, I used migrant networks theory. Migrant networks increase the propensity of an individual to migrate to a specific destination through three mechanisms: demonstrating feasibility, reducing the expected costs and risk; and increasing the expected benefits (Faist, 2000). This strategy works on the assumption that migrants and non-migrants are linked through networks of obligation and shared understandings of kinship and friendship.

To examine the cost and benefit of labor migration, I looked into the ‘financial cost and benefit’ of labor migration. I used the term ‘hidden cost of migration’ to show the extent of losses that a migrant family might encounter in the migration process. To determine the

impact of labor migration on the migrants and their families, I argued that the effects of emigration can be better understood only when the process is placed within its local context, since what may prove to be advantageous at the national level may prove to be disadvantageous to a household or community or vice-versa. This thesis introduced an improved approach to the impact-analysis of labor migration. Along with the “three R’s” of recruitment, remittances and return, I proposed another ‘R’, that is, the ‘resources’ that migrants draw on to finance the cost of migration.

In Chapter Three, I discussed general trends and patterns of emigration from Bangladesh. I argued that Bangladesh, once known as an ‘immigrant country’ has become an ‘emigrant country’ in the twentieth century. There are two forms of emigration from Bangladesh – permanent and temporary. The destinations of Bangladeshi temporary labor migration are the countries of Middle East and East and Southeast Asia. In the light of the many social and economic problems that the country continues to face, it is almost certain that the Bangladesh government will rely, in the foreseeable future, on its overseas employment program as a mechanism for coping with its unemployment and balance of payment problems. I described that Singapore has a long history of receiving labor migrants. A cursory look at the evolution of Singapore’s immigration policies revealed that Singapore has systematically adopted a whole range of policy strategies to deal with the almost perennial shortages in labor supply in almost all levels of the skills spectrum. While Singapore’s immigration policy for foreign talents is liberal, the policy for manual foreign workers is restrictive. However, recently the government has taken various measures to offer better opportunities to foreign manual workers.

In Chapter Four, I explained the factors affecting migration motivation. An ethnographic study was conducted at a migration-prone village, Gurail, in Bangladesh to document the experiences of potential migrants, non-migrants, returnees and their families with regard to the motivation for migration. In this chapter, I demonstrated that rather than being solely motivated by economic considerations, individuals were concerned about *bidesh*, culture of honor, status, relative status, and cultural notion of work and education, which are relevant to the process of rational decision-making of the potential migrants and their families.

My findings revealed that both migrants and their families chose to migrate regardless of the potential economic benefit. For a substantial number of the migrants, overseas employment yielded a negative economic return¹. According to my estimate, more than three quarters of the international migrants in Gurail realized a negative return. A very small number of migrants reaped substantial economic returns. Unsuccessful migrants

¹ This is not a unique case in Singapore. I think that ‘the age of the great honey pots’ is over, especially for unskilled workers worldwide while the highly skilled may continue to gain from migration. If we look at the last two decades, we will see that the benefits of migration for the unskilled migrants have dried up considerably. For example, in 1975, an unskilled worker from Bangladesh sponsored by the government or private recruiting agency for migration to the Middle East neither had to pay any service charge, not for their air ticket. For a 40 hour a week job, his salary was US\$ 300-400. The service conditions included one month’s holiday with pay and air ticket every year. Now for a similar type of work, a worker gets a salary of US\$ 80-100 per month working 60 hours a week. In addition, he has to pay a huge service charge and does not enjoy the annual month-long holiday with pay and travel expenses paid for. The workers have also become subjects of arbitrary dismissals and transfers (see for details, Siddiqui, 2001). In my opinion, it is high time now to consider the emigration policy of the sending country like Bangladesh, which is designed to encourage manpower export regardless of the skill composition of the potential migrants. Definitely, skill migration can benefit nation and migrants themselves.

returned home in debt. Many of the migrants ended in a worse position than when they started, leading to the emergence of a 'new migrant poor class'. Despite the negative returns, many of these unsuccessful migrants were willing to do it again. When asked, they said, "We have to keep on trying". This study questions the key assumption of neoclassical economic model, which assumes that migration decision-making is rational, that is, that the potential migrant makes a conscious decision to migrate or not to migrate through a process by which perceived economic consequences are weighted and evaluated.

This thesis showed that all migrant workers moved overseas as individuals, the actual decision-making process often involved the family (or senior members), usually the older members of families. Heads of families played the key role by paying the huge economic cost of migration. Such financial support strengthened the bond between family and the migrant, which was later expressed in remittance behavior, oral or written communication with families and commitment to the family norms and aspirations. The possibility of changing one's own destiny and status as well as that of the family / *Bari* was a driving force that pushed people from Gurail into precarious overseas journeys. Significantly, migrants saw themselves as acting for the benefits of others. While not wanting to exaggerate the altruistic or communal basis of the lives of rural Bangladeshis, their collective or familial orientation must be stressed. The rationale for migration was showed as benefiting not only or even mainly the migrant concerned family but also the larger groups like *Bari* and kinship.

I demonstrated that everyone, especially in the migration-specific districts in Bangladesh, was enmeshed in the illusion of transformative power of '*bidesh*'. Villagers

regarded international migration as a status symbol. Village norms and values upheld the 'culture of honor' in which males were prepared to do whatever was needed to defend their status as honorable men. Seeking employment overseas became a norm among young men, who did not consider themselves manly without having attempted to stay some time in Singapore. Thus, migration has been deeply ingrained into the minds of young Bangladeshis. Those who did not attempt to change their destiny through migration were considered lazy, unenterprising, and undesirable. In an attempt to migrate, potential migrants took loans; they sold land; and they ignored information on the risk of migration. I do not deny the existence of sheer poverty in rural Bangladesh but suggest that poverty alone cannot adequately account for these trends in contemporary Bangladeshi labor migration.

International labor migration and the opening up of the village to outside influences did not simply alter the perception of Bangladeshis about the outside world and the hierarchy of people's occupational choices, such as the preference for overseas employment rather than farming. It transformed people's experiences of social mobility and their understanding of work and education. Working in the local labor market was associated with low status. Even, the local community was viewed as the vestige of what is backward and undesirable, while life abroad was painted in the most glowing terms. Now increasingly more villagers think of seeking employment in Singapore than ever before. International migration has been a desired and leading status claim for rural Bangladeshis, who saw little hope of ever being able to improve themselves except through the promise of migration.

As they had few opportunities to enhance their status standing, and their limited prospects engendered a kind of fatalism that eschewed achievement and individual mobility,

individuals in Gurail viewed international migration as an attractive option. Along with absolute status, relative status became a differentiating factor in migration motivation. Relative status mattered to the villagers especially when migration became widespread at the *Bari* / kinship level. The findings suggested that the experience of migration itself has increasingly become the most important determinant of family status. The introduction of relative status as an explanatory variable is important; because it makes sense about the locational decision to migrate. For example, it offered a fresh sociological explanation for one of the most widely observed migration phenomena – its apparent self-perpetuating tendency (migrant network).

In conventional theory self-perpetuating migration is explained by a receiving-end factor – paucity or possession of crucial destination-specific capital or a sending-end factor – relative deprivation. The alternative suggested is that such perpetuation stems from the relative status factor at the sending-end, which is presently dominated by econometric explanation. “The anomaly of persistent migrant flows from some communities and not from others in the same region, despite similar economic conditions’ raises a problem that present economic explanation cannot resolve. No sociological explanation is available for this phenomenon. I argue that relative status addresses this issue because it (a) does not consider such a process as an ‘anomaly’ and (b) suggests an additional differentiating factor, relative status, in the community of origin contributing to the sociological understanding of self-perpetuating. Relative status in traditional Bangladeshi society is a contributing factor in migration motivation independent of purely economic considerations.

The thesis described how the cultural notion of work triggered the motivation for migration. The village study revealed that migrants were concerned about the ‘shame’ and ‘prestige’ associated with different types of work. If villagers transgressed the norms of the society, they would lose their honor. Many villagers, especially young ones, were forced not to work in local economies because of ‘shame’. This cultural notion of work influenced the occupational pursuit of potential migrants not only before migration but also after migration. For instance, after having international migration experience, many returnees could not engage in work not consistent with their new status in the community. Again, it was not only the cultural notion of work, that was a matter to the individuals in Gurail, but also the cultural notion of education. There were certain types of work that were regarded as ‘work of educated people’ and ‘work of uneducated people’ and educated individuals could not engage in the ‘work of uneducated people’ because of ‘shame’. The cultural notion of work and education is an important influence in the villagers’ decision to migrate.

In Chapter Five, I discussed the significance of social capital, the set of resources inherent in social and symbolic ties, in explaining migration. Bangladeshi migration to Singapore was based on an underlying social organization that supported and sustained it. This social organization included common bonds of kinship and friendship. Together they composed a web of interconnecting social relationships that supports the cycle of migration. Migrant networks are gradually built and elaborated over the years. In the initial phase, the social ties of migrants in Singapore were few in number. As more Bangladeshis from villages migrated, the density and strength of ties between migrants and others in the community rapidly expanded. As time passed, a growing number of people had friends and relatives who were in Singapore. Eventually, a critical mass of migrants was achieved,

capable of supporting and sustaining an extensive network of social ties that reduced risks of exploitation and increased the success of migration.

As the web of interpersonal connections was extended and elaborated, social capital was increasingly available to prospective migrants throughout the home community. The migration of two persons from the village of Gurail in 1988 –'89 ended up as a mass migration in 2000. Nearly everyone in Gurail can now claim some tie with Singapore migrants through kinship and friendship. Migration became an avenue, through which individuals gained prestige, and through which the family maintained itself and the community reproduced. Landless farmers in Gurail may be poor in financial resources, but they were wealthy in social capital, which they could readily convert into accessibility to Singapore. For someone from Singapore migration-prone districts, it was much easier to move to Singapore than those who were from nonmigrant-specific districts. The strength of the migrant networks and the wealth of social capital they provided to people seeking entry into the Singapore labor market explained why migration to Singapore spread to involve all social groups in the community under study and became a common feature of life throughout the community.

In Chapter Six, I explored the socio-economic life of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore. On the whole, migrants devoted most of their time to work. The data on the 'uses of time for work' revealed that precisely, 95.24 per cent of migrants spent between 11 and 18 hours for work on week days and 61.12 percent spent between 8 and 14 hours for work on Sundays (N=126). Migrants earned a good amount of cash money compared to their home country. On average, a migrant earned SG\$ 712 per month (N=126). On average,

Bangladeshi migrants could save around two-thirds of their salary if they were careful about their expenditure (and if they could earn at least \$ 450 per month). A description of the areas of expenditures of remittances revealed that migrant families used their remittances broadly in six major areas. These six areas were in descending order: basic consumption, debt repayment, land purchasing/ regaining, house-making, loan to relatives (migration purpose) and education.

The six major areas of intended uses of remittances were as follows (in descending order); basic consumption, land purchasing/regaining, house making, wedding ceremonies, education and debt repayment. Remittances which were used for education, house-making and loan to relatives contributed to human resource development, the improvement of quality of life and the formation of social capital in the long run. Apart from those mentioned above, a great deal of migrants' earnings was used for 'honor goods'- goods that brought prestige for the migrant families in relation to non-migrant families. As a strategy to uphold family's status in the community of origin, migrants were found spending on gold ornaments and other valuable electronic goods. This 'Singapuri goods' had demonstration effects. However, this data represents the cases of a handful of migrants who were able to live and work in Singapore for considerably longer period. The experiences of those migrants who were lacking the destination-end social capital were not pleasant.

In Chapter Seven, the thesis demonstrated that amid Asian financial crisis, a large number of migrants came to Singapore and encountered premature deportation. As I pointed out in the chapter, several forms of information usually enter the microeconomic decision-making model of migration: future preference, future outcomes at the present and alternative

locations, the range of alternative destinations available, and the specific characteristics of alternative destinations – both the number about which the decision maker has some information and the certainty of the information regarding them. The thesis reported that migration decision-making was not taken place under complete information. Migrants were not fully aware of the Singapore situation ahead of their migration (84 percent). Again, complete information might not lead to change of migration occurrence (16 per cent migrated despite knowledge about the crisis). It is noteworthy that 24 per cent of the victimized migrants decided to migrate again.

In Chapter Eight, I offered a financial cost-benefit analysis of migrant workers. Migration to Singapore was a costly venture. Prospective migrants paid a huge amount of cash to migrate. The economic cost of migration involved a hidden cost as well. For example, prospective migrant families borrowed cash money from moneylenders with higher interest rates, sold or mortgaged land property, livestock, or even sold the gold ornaments of women folk. The hidden cost often damaged the economic base of families leading to further deterioration of the families' economic position. Families waited for the overseas remittances hoping that it would improve the condition of families. Their hope melted away when they saw the poor flow of remittances. With regard to the financial cost and benefit of labor migration, the thesis found that the majority of the migrants of first contract (55 per cent) encountered heavy financial loss from migration. However, the lucky ones who managed to renew their contract had a better chance of gaining from migration, in most cases, more than their economic cost of migration.

The data on financial cost and benefit of labor migration shows that Bangladeshi labor migration to Singapore was not substantially beneficial for the migrants and their families. It impoverished a section of migrant families. Despite the negative consequences of labor migration, migrants wanted to remigrate (on average 87.32 per cent wanted to migrate again, N=259). The thesis identified the emergence of the ‘new migrant poor class’ in some migration-prone districts in Bangladesh. For example, in Gurail, before migration, 14 percent of families were landless and 44 percent had less than 100 decimal lands. After migration, 42 percent of families have become landless and 36 percent have now less than 100 decimal lands in total. In Hogla Kandi, before migration 24 percent of returnee families were landless and 76 percent had less than 99 decimal lands. After migration, 42 percent of families have become landless and 58 percent have now less than 99 decimal lands in total. This data suggested that landless and near landless peasants were largely the migrants and unfortunately, migration has been responsible for the dispossession of their land.

It was difficult to predict with certainty what the outcome of migration would be. A few migrants came back with lots of money, while the majority of the migrants did not. This is why in situations of ‘risk’ like migration, it is impossible to rely just on “weighing costs and benefits” (rationality), because the actual cost and benefits (at the end of contract) may be very different from the expected costs and benefits. Migrants also do not see it in this way. Again, it is impossible to rely on “economic rationality” alone in the decision-making process, because many factors lie outside of a rational consideration of the decision to migrate. The interests of the different actors in migration process are so complex and conflicting that the rational forecasting of outcome is simply not applicable to the prospective migrants and their families. Limitation of power (causal impotence) and

inadequate information lead the prospective migrants and their families to depend on luck / fortune in order to minimize the perception of risk and to yield a favorable result. Thus, actual decision-making goes beyond 'economic rationality' and includes elements like luck and fatalism as well.

The thesis reported that a huge amount of earnings was used for shopping purposes before their departure from Singapore (up to one quarter of *chalan*, 50,000 Taka, for the migrants of first contract and three quarters of *chalan*, 150,000 Taka, for the migrants of second contract). This supported my argument that migration was not undertaken just for strictly economic ends. Such expenditure patterns of the migrants were perceived to be manifestly 'unproductive' in classical economic term. However, these spending patterns have to be more closely observed because they were often for noneconomic reasons. I suggested that consumer durables are brought back home and proudly displayed in the community of origin for status reason and returned migrants spent their money conspicuously to indicate that it has been earned easily. Returnees were lavish in their generosity to fellow-villagers (as gift from Singapore) as well as to village causes in order to secure community goodwill and a higher social standing. Both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous generosity involved pronounced changes in the life-styles of the migrants.

Finally, in Chapter Nine, I proposed an improved approach, namely 'the four R's' of labor migration', to the impact-analysis of labor migration in Asia. The argument is that the causes and effects of emigration can be better understood only when the process is placed within the migrants' and their families' context as they are the main actors in the migration process and they are supposed to consume the fruit of migration. Empirical findings from

Hoglakandi show that labor migration did not fuel the local economy from an external pipeline of remittances rather it drained the local resources and degraded the families' economic health. The bulk of the migrants' families depended on remittances for basic consumption. This dependence on remittances was created by migration. Families sold the resources they would have otherwise used to generate income.

Researches that see migration as a desired income generation option for rural families did not get empirical support in this research. The financial cost and benefit analysis of migration, as well as the remittance behavior (evaluated in Chapter Eight) indicated that migrants incurred substantial expenditure to improve their social status, in addition to their basic economic sustenance (food, shelter, and clothing). The money spent on improving their social status - through the procurement of objects (material goods, gold and gifts) and practices (lavish spending, lending money to potential migrants, marrying off family's members, etc) – may be seen as irrational, but were of great importance to the migrants whose decision to migrate had implications not only for the way they were perceived in the eyes of people around them, but for their *bari*, *para* and *samaj*.

In short, if economic behavior is relatively independent of the overarching influence of particular societies and cultures, and if the migrants had been pursuing maximization, there ought to have been a cost-benefit analysis in which each decision-maker carefully and completely calculated all the costs and benefits of migrating before deciding whether to migrate, and in every case, the migrant should have used the remittances to maximize the economic well-being of his own family. However, neither of these propositions is supported in this thesis. The explanation for these discrepancies lies in the fact that economic actions

must be seen as within a broader context. Individual acquisitiveness and freedom are subordinate to the larger family and community interests. Therefore, in such contexts, economic theory fails both as an explanatory and a predictive model since it overlooks the social significance of income, consumption and exchange.

Some findings of this thesis contradict sharply the previous findings of Hossain (1986), who showed that the landed class proportionately sent more individuals to the countries of Middle East than did the landless and marginally landed classes. He reached the conclusion that through the migration process the wealthier class of the rural areas consolidated and strengthened its landed class position. The large financial cost of international migration led him easily to draw such a conclusion. As the migration cost to Singapore is higher than other destinations, migrants in Singapore are supposed to be of the wealthiest class background in Bangladesh. Land-holding data provided in Chapter Four and Chapter Nine and the uses of remittances (primarily by 44.44 per cent of families and secondarily by 40.17 percent of families for basic consumption in Chapter Five) reflected the fact that migrants did not come from the landed class background. This study suggested that informal financial institution, (e.g. traditional money-lending) and social capital have made international migration accessible for the individuals of lower socio-economic background despite the heavy financial cost of migration.

While this dissertation has attempted to explore many of the issues related to contemporary labor migration, it does not claim to be exhaustive. Many of the issues which I could not touch may be areas of further research. For example, to determine the motivational aspect of migration, a more detailed research can be done through a comparative study of a

migrant and nonmigrant village. This type of comparative study will reveal more insights into the migration decision-making and make the case stronger. Factors affect migration motivation for Singapore may be different for other destinations, for example Malaysia, South Korea or Middle East countries. This calls for a study of the migrants who leave for different destinations and the reasons for differential preferences of destinations. The effect of labor migration on the sending country is a vast area of research and can be pursued at different levels. One of the important areas is to look into position of the women left behind by the male migrants. This is another under-researched area in Bangladesh.

From the receiving country perspective, researches on the social life of migrants have not been explored in detail. There is literature on the 'ethnic enclave economies' of the developed countries. However, Asian temporary labor migration which is at least three-decade old has engendered ethnic enclave economies in many of the receiving countries but we know very little about this. Another important area of research is the sexual activities of male migrants on foreign soil. The migration of huge number of male migrants will contribute to the burgeoning sex industry in receiving countries. As female migration for commercial sex is not allowed in the receiving countries (except in Japan where 'entertainer' is hired from overseas covertly for commercial sex purpose), the trafficking of women may result from it. Research on the relationship between male migration and trafficking of women is important. Finally, foreign workers recruitment policy and practice is another area of further research.

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Appendix-3-1

Foreign worker levy expected to bring in S\$975m this year.

358 words

6 August 1992

Business Times Singapore

English

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SINGAPORE - The government expects to collect S\$975 million in foreign worker levy this year, S\$95 million more than last year. But how far the revenue jump reflects increased demand for foreign workers is not clear. That's because the levy for two categories of foreign workers - unskilled construction workers and domestic maids - went up by S\$50 each this year. Labour Minister Lee Boon Yang disclosed the levy collection in a written reply to a Parliament question from Opposition MP Ling How Doong. The 1991 collection amounted to S\$880 million. The amount collected in the first four months of 1992 was S\$325 million. "On this basis, I estimate the amount to be collected for the whole of 1992 would be about S\$975 million," said Dr Lee.

A Ministry of Labour spokesperson said a breakdown of the levy collection by sector was not available. Because of the different levy rates in each sector, the total levy revenue does not tell immediately the total number of foreign workers in Singapore. The official estimate of the foreign labour population is "more than 200,000", including more than 65,000 domestic maids. In February, the Labour Minister said demand for domestic maids grew more than 20 per cent last year. In contrast, the demand in the manufacturing and services sectors was "fairly stable". Recent estimates put the number of skilled foreign construction workers at "fewer than 1,000". With some 40,000 local workers in the industry, contractors can hire up to 120,000 foreign workers, skilled and unskilled.

Mr Ling's question was among 10 oral questions left unanswered when the hour-long question session lapsed at Friday's sitting. The answers were released yesterday. They include: Certificates of Entitlement. The vehicle quota scheme has, since its inception in May 1990 until March 1992, netted S\$693.5 million in total revenue. Hospital fees and charges. The government and restructured hospitals collected S\$132 million in the first six months of the year. This is about half the total 1991 collection of S\$266 million.

Appendix-6 -1

Journey of HOPE

By Sharon Vasoo.

995 words

18 December 1999

Straits Times

English

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It is a hefty price not many are willing to pay. Every year, more than 30,000 Bangladeshi workers sell their land and cattle, and borrow money so they can land jobs here. From next April, they will also have to sit for a test in basic construction and language skills before they can be hired. The Straits Times traces the route some of them are already taking to find their pot of gold. DAUL MIAH is a recent graduate of an overseas training centre in Bangladesh that, within a mere month, is supposed to make construction workers of farmers and cattle herders. He passed tests in basic building skills and English - tests set and marked by Singapore's Building and Construction Authority (BCA) - and came here in June. Six months later, he is going home. Through an interpreter, he said: "My boss fired me because I was making many mistakes at work. I didn't understand many things...my English is poor. After six months, the boss said I was no good, and told me to go."

Mr Miah, 30, owes more than \$5,000 to moneylenders who funded his trip here, and fears what they will do to him when he gets home broke. But how did he pass the skills test that was imposed to solve some of the problems plaguing the construction industry. Has this learning hurdle become a new avenue to exploit foreign workers? Every year, about 70,000 foreign construction workers come to Singapore, mainly from Bangladesh, India and Thailand. Their desire to work here has created a \$500-million industry that has done well by labour agents, recruiters, middlemen and employers. Now, there are new players in the game: More than 12 testing centres operate in Bangladesh, India and Thailand. Bangladesh now has three and will have four more next year. They are meant to turn around the low-skills high-accident problem in Singapore's construction industry, by providing the necessary training in building skills and English that would make the foreign workers competent and skilled.

But Mr Miah's case shows that passing does not guarantee the worker a job, though it does guarantee savings for the employer, who pays a \$30 monthly levy for the "skilled" worker, instead of \$470 for an unskilled one. As the BCA discovered recently, people have managed to get in as "skilled workers" without taking a test. Others were paid to take the tests for them in Bangladesh. In 10 cases so far this year, the stand-in scam was exposed by officers with BCA's training arm, the Construction Industry Training Institute. By February, workers seeking the skills-evaluation certificate exam must sit for an additional written test as well as a practical test in English. The extra test will check their knowledge of basic building processes. By April, construction companies can hire only workers who have passed the test in basic construction and language skills.

Will this improve productivity and reduce worksite accidents? That remains to be seen. Only one thing is for sure: Once the tests become compulsory, the overseas test centres will be minting money. Still unresolved is the issue of who is responsible for making sure the workers who come here can do the job well and safely. At a recent meeting, the BCA told the training centres they should play their part by screening the trainees. The centres said their job was training, not recruitment, which was for the labour recruiters to handle. But it can hardly be to the labour recruiters' advantage to deliver good skilled workers who would stay on the job in Singapore for several years. The truth of the matter is clearly seen when one considers this fact - the recruiter gets a one-time cut of the \$6,000 to \$8,000 that a foreign worker pays to get a job here. The more he sends, the more he earns.

So why shouldn't he keep shunting farmers, cattle herders and fishermen to the centres? Government must step in and set stricter standards in the test centres. The training methods and curriculum must be controlled from Singapore, and not by businessmen operating in villages in Bangladesh, India or Thailand. The training period should be lengthened. Can one realistically turn a farmer into a competent construction worker within a single month? Test centres should also be made to keep detailed records of the labour recruiters they work with, so that unscrupulous agents can be identified and banned. Make the centres put up a hefty security bond as well, which they will forfeit if they fail to meet standards set by the BCA. Standards must go beyond setting examinations and grading them. BCA should specify student-teacher ratios and spell out requirements for the trainers, if not requiring them to be tested and grade them too.

If foreign workers can be expected to master simple English in a short time, the employers who hire them surely can be expected to learn basic Bengali, Hindi or Thai. Also, while employers, test centres, contractors and labour agents all have a voice and easy access to officialdom, the foreign workers have no voice. Is it time to consider union representation for foreign workers, so that Singapore's excellent model of tripartite cooperation in problem solving can be applied to the construction industry as well? With more than 310 deaths resulting from worksite accidents since 1994, the construction industry has proven that it cannot clean up its own problems. The Government stepped in with an ambitious Construction 21 plan in October to re-invent an industry plagued by over-reliance on cheap, unskilled labour, poor productivity and poor safety. But dealing with only the construction companies, without bringing under stricter control the test centres, recruiters and others in the labour trade will mean that more workers will suffer the same fate as Mr Miah.

Appendix-7-1

Foreign workers and compassion - remember our ancestral past

27 July, 1997, Straits Times, Singapore

GETTING agitated again over the Indians and Bangladeshis in Serangoon Road? Not too far away, at the Golden Mile complex, you run smack into throngs of Thais. Filipino maids? They moved their staging post several times in Orchard Road long before it became a habit for foreign workers to seek companionship among their own kind on their day off. If policies on foreign labour change, it is not improbable that Sunday enclaves will emerge over time for Myanmar or Indonesian workers. Not ghettos - by design, these can never establish themselves in Singapore - just gathering places. Can one assume from the occasional (very occasional) release of bile in letters to newspapers or in Feedback Unit sessions that Singaporeans are largely tolerant about these intrusions in their pristine midst, or at least indifferent? It is hazardous to generalise about any given situation. I have mentioned in past commentaries that the lack of instant but professionally-done polls here on issues of public interest makes it necessary for opinion makers to rely on their instincts to an unreasonable degree when trying to divine specific trends. We accept the risk that we may stand revealed in all our folly. On the matter of foreign workers, my gut feel is that the unsympathetic view taken by a Straits Times reader (Chong Ryh Huei, ST July 19) is indicative of a wider disaffection towards menial workers from around the region.

I stand chastised if readers would disprove my view. The theme of the letter is that Indian foreign workers gathered in Little India on Sundays get in the way. They are a public nuisance - period. They crowd the roads, hog the buses and public phones, drop litter on the clean alleyways and patches of green. Mr Chong is upset that food peddlers who profit from a lively custom are blocking walkways and road shoulders. He worries about road safety. Motorists foolish enough to drive into Little India at those times could hit these guest workers who have the annoying habit of darting this way and that across Serangoon Road and its network of lanes. That could be troublesome. Overall, the tone showed a lack of compassion, as if the wants of these people mattered little. Not even the letter writer's token concession to charitable feeling ("I'm not against people here to earn an honest living ...") could dilute the distaste he must feel about the state of affairs. To extrapolate from this example is admittedly a bit of a stretch. But those who feel as Mr Chong does obviously care passionately that their neat little Sundays and orderly little lives be not inconvenienced by the presence of indisciplined hordes from elsewhere. It is no less their due, actually.

But should not a care be expressed about how bleak the outlook can be from the foreign workers' end of the view-finder? Where to go? What to do? How to kill boredom? Where to have inexpensive meals? Where to buy clothing and utensils for less than S\$10? With whom to share news about home or talk about movies? A short three decades ago, the common run of Singaporeans were asking of themselves much the same dreary questions. Now that they are comfortably middle-class, with a dollar or two to spare, how vexed they get when they are reminded of the poverty they had left behind not so long ago. Of such reflexes are

parvenus made. There are just too many of them in any new-rich society. One could place the lack of empathy on the same plane as the different kinds of public reaction to the case of the battered teenage Indonesian maid and the paralysed Bangladeshi construction worker who was left for dead in a ditch by his employers. Those Singaporeans who visited the two unfortunates in hospital and left money and gifts formed the soft core of society who feel as human beings do. They were not being patronising, they reacted instinctively against cruelty and inhumanity. Yes, I hear readers protest that this proves the point that a sense of decency is alive and well among Singaporeans. But that was being reactive.

To the extent that only beasts would feel nothing about cruelty, I should think Singaporeans would miss a beat if such acts of kindness were not shown consistently. What they would wish to do is to internalise and ask why no voice of condemnation had been raised in protest over the recent cases. Then they might be troubled. As an indication, our newspapers did not get too many letters expressing outrage over the Bangladeshi and Indonesian workers. Yet, we routinely receive a lot more mail from wounded souls crying dirges of anguish over reports of cats and dogs being mistreated. It calls to mind a stupefying absurdity about British life: that you can get away with kicking an old man lying in a park, but heaven help you if you kick a dog. Mixed-up priorities, or worse? This in no way implies that blithe unconcern is endemic among Singaporeans. Many care, if quietly. Reactive acts are fine; they are a form of penance. But habitual and very public expressions of disapproval against unacceptable behaviour are the strongest inoculation against its becoming a norm. An odium must attach to it. One must speak up in protest: write to the newspapers, let your MP know that you are scandalised. Letting off steam in private company does not help create communal benchmarks of opprobrium. Now, back to the South Asians in Little India. On a broad scale, Mr Chong will find plenty of support for his uncompromising stand.

Community shorthand has it that the presence of foreign menial workers has bred violent crime and increased the incidence of burglaries; they bring disease; they are noisy and insanitary in their personal habits; they lower the value of the neighbourhood were quarters for them to be located there. Prejudice dies hard. But those who may be inclined to think the way the uncharitable ones do need only reflect on a singular fact. The Indians and Bangladeshis are here to do an honest spot of work for honest pay. They labour at jobs no Singaporean will take. They have families to support, promises to keep, dreams to work at. If the unsympathetic are unmoved by this oft-repeated defence on guest workers' behalf, then look in the mirror of their ancestral past. Their forefathers - for many, their parents - made their way to the south seas from China and India to seek salvation. They were probably not a sight to endear themselves to the rich and established of the time. I defy them to point out any spiritual difference between their ancestors and the foreigners of today who crowd Serangoon Road and other public places. (by Chua Huck Cheng)

Appendix-7-2

Send foreign workers home quickly

By Alan John. 793 words. 1 July 1998, Straits Times

USE them, and lose them. That may be the sorry slogan of some employers of foreign workers here. If you read The Sunday Times last weekend you could not have missed the report about the foreigners who chased a dream of earning big money on Singapore construction sites. That dream may have come true for others in better years, but it is not so for many a foreign worker today. This is the wrong time for the unskilled foreign worker to be here. The economic slowdown has been wiping out their jobs, and if they have no work, they really ought to go home. But some have refused to leave. They say they have borrowed too much to make the journey from their villages to Singapore, and cannot face returning home penniless. So despite having their work permits cancelled, they have chosen to remain as illegal overstayers. They hope for new jobs, but are more likely to face jail, the cane and repatriation if arrested. It is appalling to learn that these men are living in squalor in very public areas as they play a cat-and-mouse game with the authorities.....

If a newspaper reporter can walk around Little India and find scores of these foreigners, it tells you how little effort employers have made to track down the missing men. When employers can wash their hands because they have lost the security deposit, something is sorely lacking in the way the problem is being dealt with now. In the first five months of this year, 7,000 foreign workers had their work permits cancelled, mainly because of the economic downturn, and there might be as many as 16,800 cancellations for this year. If a trend is emerging of runaway workers who do not want to be sent home, some new action is called for to make employers more accountable. There is at least one case before the courts, of an employer whose 13 foreign workers refused to leave last year because they were not paid. He is appealing against a sentence of four weeks' jail and a S\$10,000 fine on charges of helping his workers to overstay. Other employers of men now living in the streets should be taken to court too, if it is found that they were less than thorough in their efforts to put their workers on the plane home or to look for them after they absconded.

Employers of foreign workers must learn that treating their workers decently includes making sure that they leave when they have to. These employers are to blame if Singapore gets the bad press for attracting and using foreigners as legal workers in good times, only to let them end up as lawbreakers by overstaying when no longer needed. We have not yet seen any sudden rise in crime involving these workers, but it seems a short step from eking an existence and begging for meals to becoming desperate enough to commit a snatch theft, a robbery or worse. The Singapore authorities can start putting a stop to the problem today and prevent it from growing, if somebody gives the order for the clean-up to begin. We have seen what the police can do to flush out illegal immigrants from forest hideouts and construction sites. We have seen swift action taken to prevent would-be illegal immigrants from entering Singapore. The jobless overstayers and their employers need tackling now. [The writer is News Editor of The Straits Times].

Appendix -7-3

Bangladeshi Workers Conned into Paying Thousands to Work here

8 June 1997, The Straits Times, Singapore

HUNDREDS of Bangladeshis are being conned into paying thousands of dollars to labour agents to work here only to have their contracts cancelled after a few months and bundled off home, said the Bangladesh High Commission. A spokesman estimates that about 1,000 Bangladeshi construction workers have been duped in this manner since May last year. Each had paid S\$8,000 to labour agents in Bangladesh for a two-year contract to work in Singapore. But within months of their arrival, their employers would cancel their contracts and work permits, and put them on the first plane home. The workers also alleged that they were not paid for working here. The law allows labour agents or employers to have work permits cancelled without giving a reason. The spokesman added that the High Commission has written to the Ministry of Labour about the matter. He said: "There should be a law penalising agents and contractors who cancel contracts prematurely. Workers will be ruined financially if they are sent home too early." A ministry statement yesterday said it was not possible to check every work permit cancellation because there were so many foreign workers here. It is not known how many Bangladeshis work here. But the ministry added that it had revoked wrongful cancellations before.

"If cases of wrongful cancellations are brought to the ministry's attention, we will investigate the matter. The ministry will not hesitate to take the necessary action against errant contractors." The Singapore Contractors Association said it was aware of such practices and was working with the Bangladesh High Commission and the authorities to see how the problem could be solved. Five lawyers here who are trying to get compensation for the workers told The Sunday Times that the workers often sold their land or borrowed money to come here. A lawyer who declined to be named described how the scam works: A labour agent's representative in Dhaka visits the villages and offers the men two-year contracts. On arrival, they are handed to the contractors on the understanding that their permits will be cancelled after a few months. The agent then replaces them with a fresh batch of workers. The lawyer said: "Agents make a profit of several thousand dollars for every worker they bring in. Air fare and accommodation for these workers cost only S\$1,000 each. A higher turnover of workers means more profit." Bangladeshi workers, he said, want the security of a two-year contract because it would take that long for them to recoup the money spent on securing a job here.

The workers' basic pay is supposed to be S\$15 a day. Assuming they would work six days a week, they could earn close to S\$9,400 over two years. And if they moonlight or do overtime, which most do, they could earn more than S\$600 a month. To ensure that the workers do not escape en route, the contractors or agents hire private security guards to accompany the workers to Changi Airport. The Sunday Times spoke to five security companies which said they had accepted such assignments before. Security manager S .R. Bala of Safe Technology said that some workers cried, went down on their knees and pleaded not to be sent back. He said: "Agents tell us these workers are being sent back because they are trouble-makers. "But the workers tell us a different story. They said they are being forced to go home. We feel sorry for them but we have to accept the agents' word." How it works * Each construction worker had paid S\$8,000 to labour agents in Bangladesh for a two-year contract to work in Singapore. But within months of their arrival, their employers would cancel their contracts and work permits, and put them on the first plane home. The agent then replaced them with a fresh batch of workers (By Jasbir Singh).

Appendix-8-1

Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore: A Sociological Study of Temporary Labor Migration Questionnaire for Interviews at Residence

Questionnaire No Time: Palace: Date: / / 2003

Migrants of First Contract Period²

1. Nature of Skill Composition in Singapore: Skilled / Unskilled / Not Available / NC
2. Contract Period: One Year / Two Year (NC/NA) Months of stay: NC/ NA
3. What was your last month income? No Income / NC/ NA
4. **Total investment cost / Chalan of migration:** Take / SG\$ NC/ NA
5. Money from Family Savings: NA/NC/Do not know
6. Money from selling or mortgaging land: NA/NC/Do not Know
7. Money from loan from money-lenders (with interest) NA/NC/Do not know
8. Money from relatives in Bangladesh (without interest) NA/NC/ Do not know
9. Money from relatives (remittances) in Abroad NA/NC/Do not know
10. Money from miscellaneous sources (Gold/livestock/ others) NA/NC/Do not know
11. Did you get your invest back? Yes / No / NC/ Not Available
12. Do you hope to get your Investment during your contract period? Yes/ No / NC / NA
13. What is the total amount of money you hope to remit during the contract period?
1. Not Applicable 2. Only Chalan 3. Chalan plus half of chalan 4. Double Chalan 5.
Double plus another half chalan 6. Triple chalan 7. Others 8. Comment
14. **Do you want to renew your contract? Yes / No / NC/ Not Available**
15. **If you are a remigrant, did you get your investment in your every last migration? Yes /No /NC/ Not Applicable**
16. **How many years were you in Singapore before? Years: NC/ Not Applicable**

Note:

² Migrants who have been working for more than 4 months in the case of one year contract and 8 months in the case of 2 year contract are interviewed.

Appendix-8-2

Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore: A Sociological Study of Temporary Labor Migration Questionnaire for Interviews at Residence

Questionnaire No Time: Palace: Date: / / 2003

Migrants of Second Contract Period³

1. Nature of Skill Composition in Singapore: **Skilled** / **Unskilled** / Not Available/ NC
2. Contract Period: One-Year / Two-Year / (NC/ Not Applicable) Total Months of stay: NC/ Not Available
3. What was your last month income? No Income/ NC/ Not Available
4. Fees for renewal contract (SG\$/Taka): _____NC/ Not Available
5. Did you get your investment back (compared to last payment in BD)? Yes / No / NC/ Not Available
6. What is the total amount of money you have remitted until today?
 1. Not Applicable 2. Only Chalan 3. Chalan plus half of chalan 4. Double Chalan 5. Double plus another half chalan 6. Triple chalan 7. More than Triple 8. Others 9. No Comment
7. What is the total amount of money you hope to remit in this contract period?
 1. Only Chalan 2. Chalan plus half of chalan 3. Double Chalan 4. Double plus another half chalan 5. Triple chalan 6. Triple plus another half 7. Fourth times of chalan 8. More than fourth times of chalan 9. No Comment 10. Others
8. Do you want to renew your contract? Yes / No / NC/ Not Available
9. If you are a remigrant, did you get your investment in your every last migration? Yes/ No/ NC/ Not Applicable
10. How many years did you stay in Singapore before? Years: NC/ Not Applicable

Note:

³ Migrants who have been working more than 24 months are interviewed.

Appendix-8-3

Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore: A Sociological Study of Temporary labor Migration

Questionnaire for Returnees at Airport

Questionnaire Number _____ Date: / / 2003 Airlines: BG/ MH / SQ: Time _____

First Contract Period

14. Nature of Skill Composition in Singapore: **Skilled** (skilled in BD or SG) / **Unskilled**
15. Total investment cost / *Chalan* of migration: _____ Take / SG\$
16. Did you get your invest/*Chalan* back? **Yes** / **No** / **NC** / **NA**
17. What is the Total Amount of Money you have remitted to Bangladesh: NC/ NA
Approximately Between _____ and _____
18. **Amount of Total Shopping: Take/ SG \$** _____
19. **Major consumer goods: TV/ Music System/** _____ **/ (not asked, mentioned visible goods only)**
20. **Do you want to migrate again to Singapore? Yes / No / NA/ NC**
21. **If you are a remigrant, did your get back your *chalan* during the first migration? Yes/ No/ NC/ NA**
22. **Total Years of overseas employment (including other countries): Years:**
NA/NC
(NC: No comment, NA: Not Available)

Note:

Appendix-8-4

Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore A Sociological Study of Temporary labor migration

Questionnaire for Returnees at Airport

Questionnaire Number Date: / / 2003 Airlines: BG/ MH / SQ: Time

Second Contract Period

1. Nature of Skill Composition in Singapore: **Skilled** (Skilled in BD or SG) / **Unskilled**
2. Total investment cost / *Chalan* of migration: _____ Taka / G\$
3. Did you get your invest back? **Yes / No**
4. What is the total amount of money you have remitted? NC/ Do know
Approximately Between _____ and _____
5. Amount of Total Shopping: SG\$ _____
6. Major consumer goods: TV/ Music System/ _____ (not asked, mentioned visible goods only)
7. Do you want to migrate again to Singapore? Yes / No / Do not Know/ No
Comment
8. If you are a remigrant, did u get your *Chalan* during the first migration? Yes / No/ NC/ NA
9. Total Years of Overseas Employment (including other countries): Years : NC/NA/
NC: No Comment; NA: Not Available

Note: