
Bangladeshi workers' perception of Singapore, choice of Singapore as work destination and journey here

By Roy Lim, June 2018.

Foreword by TWC2: This is a research paper by intern Roy Lim, drawn from interviews he conducted in May and June 2018. The full report includes appendices detailing each interviewee's response, but because the appendices contain personal identifiers, they have not been included in this published version.

The "\$" in this paper refers to the Singapore Dollar.

Introduction

Foreign workers are an integral part of Singapore's economy; in December 2017, Singapore's total foreign workforce stands at 1,368,000.¹ This represents a sizeable portion of Singapore's total labour force.² When presented with such statistics, one may conceivably draw a few conclusions, and one of the most intuitive ones would probably be that Singapore is a rather attractive destination for migrant workers.

However, migrant workers often have to put themselves, and possibly their families, in a precarious financial position so as to get to their "promised land". As this article explains³, a foreign worker's journey to an unacquainted land is neither simple nor smooth-sailing. As a matter of fact, foreign workers normally have to part ways with a hefty sum of money and mobilise key relationships just to depart Bangladesh and obtain a work permit in Singapore. It is a trying and complicated process that disadvantages the worker, even before he has started work in Singapore.

In this paper, I illustrate (1) how Bangladeshi workers obtain information and decide if Singapore is a great destination for work and (2) how a typical Bangladeshi labourer working in Singapore's construction industry makes his way to Singapore. By answering these questions, it is with hope that readers would better appreciate the unforeseen obstacles and difficulties that Bangladeshi workers

¹ Ministry of Manpower. "Foreign Workforce Numbers", <http://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>

² Ministry of Manpower. "Summary Table: Labour Force", <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-Summary-Table.aspx>

³ Al Jazeera, "Migrant Dreams: Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore", <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/rewind/2017/01/migrant-dreams-bangladeshi-workers-singapore-170110091428740.html>

have to face on their tumultuous journey to Singapore. The key findings of this paper are based on interviews with 18 Bangladeshi foreign workers in Singapore.

Method

This paper is a qualitative study that derives its findings chiefly from interviews with Bangladeshi construction or marine workers in Singapore. They were conducted mostly at TWC2's Cuff Road Project, our meals programme. All respondents in this paper are foreign workers who face either an injury or a salary issue in Singapore. Interviews for this paper were conducted with two focuses in mind: (1) investigating a Bangladeshi worker's perception of Singapore before and after coming here and (2) uncovering the various tasks that a Bangladeshi worker has to carry out, or the different stages he has to undergo, before he departs for Singapore. Apart from interviews, journalistic sources and government statistics were also consulted.

Bangladeshi Perceptions: Why Singapore in the First Place?

Before delving into the preparatory procedures that Bangladeshi workers have to undergo to work in Singapore, this paper first considers why Bangladeshi construction workers are so keen on making this arduous journey. Prima facie, one may assume that such decisions, much like many of ours, are the product of a substantial amount of information and research. However, many of my respondents' answers reveal that their decision to work overseas is not always based on credible sources of information.

Here, it is useful to split workers into three different groups, even though the characteristics of workers from these groups may overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first group of workers base their decisions largely on their agents' words. Workers who fall into this category rely heavily on their agents for information and would often follow their agents' recommendations or suggestions. For instance, when asked why he chose to work as a construction worker in Singapore, among the variety of destinations that a foreign worker could go, Respondent 1 replied that his decision was primarily based on his agent's suggestion that Singapore was a fantastic place to earn an income. When probed further if he had referred to other credible sources, such as local newspapers or the Internet, to corroborate this information, he emphatically replied "no". The first group of workers, hence, are hugely uninvolved in the decision-making process and predominantly fall back on their agents to make judicious decisions on their behalf.

The second group of workers, on the other hand, explain that personal connections are a fundamental consideration in their decision to work to Singapore. These workers usually mention that they have a cousin or brother working in Singapore, and that they follow suit after seeing their familial counterparts succeed. For instance, Respondent 2 told me that he preferred Singapore over the Gulf countries because he had relatives already working in Singapore. As a result, this worker believed that

he could tap on established local networks and utilise these connections to find himself a good job in Singapore.

One final group of workers choose Singapore mainly because of the benefits of working here, which includes societal security and good economic opportunities. Usually more independent and clear about their objectives of working overseas, many workers in this group contrast Singapore with other possible destinations and arrive at their decision after rationalising that Singapore offered them the most rewarding monetary benefit and social safety. For example, in my interview with Respondent 9, he revealed that it was likely that he could make more money in Saudi Arabia as compared to Singapore, because the loose labour laws there would allow him to moonlight and make extra cash after stipulated working hours. Singapore's strict labour laws would not have permitted him to do the same. Nevertheless, he was relieved to have chosen Singapore, as he was able to work in a law-governed environment and earn a pretty decent income at the same time. Another worker, Respondent 7, interestingly suggested that although he had a brother working in Saudi Arabia, he was still more inclined to work in Singapore because there were better economic opportunities here. Respondent 15 concurred with Respondent 7's claim that economic opportunities were better in Singapore; he asserted that while his friend paid 700,000 taka (approximately \$11,026) to work in Saudi Arabia but earned only 10,000 taka a month (approximately \$157), he spent only approximately 300,000 taka (approximately \$4,725) and had a better salary in Singapore.⁴

An Unceasing Desire to Work

Despite their struggles with salary or injury issues here, most Bangladeshi construction workers interviewed for this paper possess a favourable perception of Singapore, and many of them desire to return to Singapore again for future work assignments. For instance, even though Respondent 7 lamented that he had his salary reduced by his employer soon after coming here, he remained rather positive about Singapore and mentioned he would work here again if he could.

Such a finding initially seems contradictory to logical thought, because it is understandable that a person who has received insufficient monetary remuneration or suffered work injuries would think twice about working in the same place again. Why do these Bangladeshi construction workers, then, have such an unceasing desire to work here? While a thorough investigation of these motivations is beyond the ambit of this paper, some of my interviewees' responses may be illuminating. It is certainly plausible that many foreign workers want to lengthen their stay in Singapore because of positive economic and legal factors; most respondents heaped praise on Singapore's lawfulness and lucrative income. Online sources have also explained why Singapore is a great destination for foreign workers.⁵

⁴ Respondent 15 also suggested that moonlighting was no longer permitted in Saudi Arabia. That said, since he has never worked there, this information might simply be hearsay.

⁵ Transitioning.Org. "Top 10 Reasons Why Singapore is the BEST Place to Work in for Foreign Workers", <http://www.transitioning.org/2011/04/16/top-10-reasons-why-singapore-is-the-best-place-to-work-in-for-foreign-workers/>

Having said that, it is also plausible that some of these workers' desire to continue working here is explained by the huge debts they have racked up. As one shall see in the next section, a Bangladeshi construction worker would have to generate a sizeable sum of money before he could even think about leaving his homeland for greener pastures.

Tracing A Bangladeshi Worker's Journey to Singapore

A lot of money is required to send a Bangladeshi worker to Singapore. Money is not just crucial for a worker to secure the means of coming to Singapore, but also essential for him to prevent tiresome delays in the process. A Bangladeshi worker usually begins his venture overseas by engaging the services of a typically unlicensed agent, a middle-man who would help secure the worker's job and In-Principle Approval for Work Permit (IPA). Hiring an agent is not a trivial affair because of its exorbitant cost; most respondents have spent approximately \$6,000 to \$12,000 on an agent, and many of them had to take loans from a bank or family members to afford such fees. It is of paramount importance for Bangladeshis, especially first-timers, to enlist an agent's help, should he wish to depart Bangladesh and work overseas without much difficulties, because the agent would help the worker search for available job openings, apply for his work permit, and give him advice on other administrative procedures that he would have to go through before leaving the country.

An agent's help is not the only prerequisite for working in Singapore, as a worker also requires the necessary certification to obtain his desired job. As a result, Bangladeshi workers have to attend training schools and sit for examinations in these institutions before they begin work in Singapore. This often translates to a sizeable sum of money that the worker has to fork out just for skills training. Respondent 2 mentioned that he had to borrow money from a bank in Bangladesh to fund his studies in a training centre, with the hope that his high salary in Singapore would eventually allow him to repay his debt. Even after payment is made, however, there was no guarantee that every worker was able to take the final examination and graduate, as Respondent 10 disclosed. In training centres with dubious practices, some Bangladeshi workers might find themselves waiting perpetually for an opportunity to take their examinations.

Workers who attend training schools do not only have to pay hefty school fees, but also indirectly suffer a huge economic opportunity cost because of the notoriously long time it takes for them to register and take their school examinations. According to a previous study on the subject, workers who enrolled in official training centres had to wait an average of 5 months before taking their final examinations.⁶ My interviewees largely concurred with this statistic; interviewees mentioned that it took about 4 to 6 months at least to graduate from these institutions. Hence, even before departing their homeland, Bangladeshi workers already face the prospects of losing a huge sum of money, just to acquire basic certifications that are required for him to find a job in Singapore.

⁶ Transient Workers Count 2. "Training Centres in Bangladesh Have Become Money-Minting Machines", <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/09/22/training-centres-in-bangladesh-have-become-money-minting-machines/>

After seeking an agent's help and passing a training centre's examinations, a worker still has to complete a series of administrative tasks that would enable him to work in Singapore. To begin, he would have to get a passport. He would then have to make an emigration clearance card, known as a Bureau of Manpower, Education and Training (BMET) card, in order to leave Bangladesh for Singapore. Finally, he would have to secure an air ticket to Singapore. It is natural for any migrant worker to go through these procedures, but in Bangladesh, these various administrative tasks are also points where a Bangladeshi worker would not be able to proceed smoothly if he did not fork out additional cash, or as my respondents call it, pay "underhand money".

Brokers often appear at designated locations to facilitate a worker's administrative processes, and any migrant workers who do not wish to queue pay these brokers money to obtain their necessary documents quickly. Respondent 8 recounted that he simply paid and relied on a broker to make his BMET card because he knew that, with money, the process would be smooth. A curious reader might think that a worker could still secure his documents if he chose not to pay, albeit in a longer period of time, but Respondent 8 explained that it would likely be an interminable wait for those who chose to queue without paying. According to the same interviewee, those who engaged in the services of a broker got their BMET cards, passports, and air tickets fairly quickly, and they were frequently allowed to skip the queue altogether. Therefore, it becomes clear, after examining the various stages of a Bangladeshi worker's journey to Singapore, that there are a lot of cash transfers and people involved in the process.

Discussion

In evaluation, this paper has revealed several key insights. First, Bangladeshi workers who seek a sojourn to Singapore often have to pay a very substantial amount of money that Singaporeans are sometimes unaware of. As a result, working overseas is an option that is more realistic for the Bangladeshi middle-class, and not for those languishing in poverty. Respondent 17, for example, said that friends in poor financial situations were not able to make the same trip as him because they could not afford agents and attend training centres.

Second, a Bangladeshi worker is often supporting a larger group of people in the Bangladeshi economy than one would imagine. On his way to Singapore, the Bangladeshi engages in an agent's services to acquire a job and IPA and pays a broker to complete administrative tasks on his behalf. Hence, before he has even left Singapore, a worker's potential remuneration is already split among various individuals in Bangladeshi society. These individuals, who do not generate income like Bangladeshi migrant workers do, further burden the migrant workers who are striving to give their families a better life.

Third, Bangladeshi workers usually work on very limited information when they make their decision to work overseas. Interviewees of this paper tended to obtain information about working overseas from their agents, family, or friends. Without referring to more credible journalistic reports that offer more realistic and specific accounts of working in Singapore, Bangladeshi workers might be overly positive about their endeavours, and end up incurring huge debts that they cannot repay. Reuters'

report of Mohammad Ashadul Islam illustrates this point. After selling his family's land and borrowing money from both banks and family to accumulate \$12,000 to come to Singapore, Islam found himself retrenched and only managed to make about \$5,000 before he was asked to return to Bangladesh. However, without making enough to pay back his loans, Islam said in an interview, "I go back for what? No fish, no land. I go back or die, same-same".⁷ A Bangladeshi worker, hence, would conceivably benefit from obtaining information from more credible sources, even though it is a question if these workers possess the English proficiency required to fully comprehend these articles.

Conclusion

This paper sought to answer two major questions: (1) how Bangladeshi workers decide if Singapore is the best place to work and (2) how these workers make the trip to Singapore. Bangladeshi workers often rely on their agents, family members, or friends for information on the prospect of working overseas, and it is questionable if they possess the means to consult more credible sources of information. Most Bangladeshi workers, after obtaining information from their friends or family, decide to come to Singapore because of perceived economic opportunities and social stability. These workers spend huge sums of money to get to Singapore, as they have to hire agents, attend training centres, and pay brokers to obtain the necessary paperwork or certification. Bangladeshi workers are often eager to work in Singapore because they believe that they can earn more money here, but the reality can be very harsh for workers when things do not go their way.

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⁷ Fathin Ungku and Ruma Paul. "Singaporean Dream Sours for Some Bangladeshi Workers as They Go Home with Big Debts", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-migrants-jobs/singaporean-dream-sours-for-some-bangladeshi-workers-as-they-go-home-with-big-debts-idUSKBN19A320>



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