



SOCIO-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT OF  
BANGLADESHI WORKERS IN MALAYSIA: A CASE  
STUDY

BY

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for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Sociology  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The present work is an empirical study of Bangladeshi workers' socio-cultural adjustment to Malaysian environment. It also investigates the causes of labour migration to Malaysia, workers' living and working conditions, their level of performance as well as their involvement in social and deviational adjustments. The main thrust of the present study is to explore and assess the three dimensional adjustment of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysian social, work and non-work environment. It has taken three dimensions of adjustment namely general or non-work adjustment, work adjustment and interaction adjustment into consideration, collected relevant information about them and demonstrated workers' level of adjustment. The study is based on the interview of 100 Bangladeshis migrant workers who were selected according to two stage sampling procedure. On one stage, an area where Bangladeshi workers reside was selected through random sampling procedure. On the second stage, 100 respondents were selected from the area according to purposive snowball sampling procedure. The data were analysed by SPSS version 18.0 software. Cronbach Alpha was computed to ascertain the reliability and validity of the instrument. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The study revealed that Bangladeshi workers' adjustment on non-work or general adjustment is quite high but their adjustment is less on work adjustment dimension. It is observed that two factors: motivation to high income and social network, play an important role in Bangladeshi workers' migration to Malaysia. The other important results was that workers' degree of comfort (adjustment) with non-work condition was related to their performance of work but their degree of comfort (adjustment) with work adjustment is not related to their work performance. Finally, the study suggested that adequate measures should be taken to provide pre-departure training on job and host country's culture to the expected migrant workers. The government of the native country should also monitor the activities of recruiting agencies.

## خلاصة البحث

تناول هذه الدراسة التجريبية مدى التكيف الاجتماعي والثقافي للعمال البنجلاديشيين في البيئة الماليزية، وتحقق في أسباب هجرة اليد العاملة إلى ماليزيا، إضافة إلى ظروف العمال، وحالاتهم المعيشية والعملية، ومستوى أدائهم، ناهيك عن مشاركتهم في التكيف الاجتماعي والانحراقي. وتهدف هذه الدراسة بشكل رئيسي إلى استكشاف وتقييم ثلاثة أبعاد في تكيف العمال البنجلاديشيين مع المجتمع الماليزي، والبيئة العملية وغير العملية. وأخذت الدراسة بعين الاعتبار ثلاثة أبعاد للتكيف وهي، التكيف العام أو غير العملي، والتكيف العملي، والتكيف التفاعلي. وقامت بجمع المعلومات ذات الصلة عنهم، وكشفت عن مستوى العمال في التكيف. وتساعد الدراسة على إجراء لقاءات مع 100 من العمال البنجلاديشيين المهاجرين، حيث تم اختيارهم وفقا لمرحلتين في إجراءات العينة. في المرحلة الأولى، تم اختيار العينة بشكل عشوائي من المنطقة التي يقيم فيها العمال البنجلاديشيين. وفي المرحلة الثانية، تم اختيار العينة من 100 منطقة وفقا لإجراء عينة الشبكية (كرة الثلج). وقد تم تحليل البيانات بواسطة برنامج الحزمة الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية، في إصداره 10.0. وتمت عملية الحساب بمعادلة ألفا-كرونباخ، للتأكد من صلاحية وثقة المنهج البحثي. كما تم استخدام تحليل الانحدار المتعدد لاختبار فرضيات البحث. وكشفت الدراسة بأن تكيف العمال البنجلاديشيين في التكيف العام أو غير العملي مرتفع جدا، إلا أن التكيف العملي يعد منخفضا نوعا ما. ولوحظ بأن هناك عاملين وهما عامل الدافع إلى الحصول على دخل مرتفع، والشبكة الاجتماعية يلعبان دورا مهما في هجرة العمال البنجلاديشيين إلى ماليزيا. كما كشفت النتائج بأن درجة راحة العمال (التكيف) في غير العمل يتعلق بأدائهم في العمل، لكن درجة راحتهم (التكيف) في العمل لاتتعلق بأدائهم في العمل. وأخيرا، أشارت الدراسة إلى أنه ينبغي اتخاذ التدابير الكافية لتدريب العمال قبل مغادرتهم البلاد، لاسيما في مهنهم وتعليمهم ثقافة الدولة المضيفة. وينبغي للحكومة المحلية رصد أنشطة وكالات التوظيف.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Sociology and Anthropology).

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Jamil Farooqui  
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Sociology and Anthropology).

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Md. Sayed Uddin

Signature.....

Date .....

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MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY**

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my Father Nur Nobi Chowdhury, Mother Mrs. Hosneara Begum, Sisters Mrs. Jesmin Aktar, Mrs. Yesmin Aktar and Mrs. Norun Nahar Begum Dalia. My brothers Md. Salah Uddin Masud, Md. Sahab Uddin Sobog and Mahmudun Nobi Azim.*

*&*

*I would like to dedicate my dissertation to Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia.*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

International labour migration promotes a multiple set of costs and benefits for the receiving country, migrant workers and their countries of origin (World Migration, 2005). Contemporary Asian region is currently witnessing a massive movement of non-permanent labour, mostly the flow of contract workers from labour surplus countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Myanmar to non-surplus countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand (Abu-Bakar, 2002). For the last few decades, rapid industrialization has caused a vast labour shortage in Malaysia. It has led various sectors to import foreign workers from different countries and socio-cultural backgrounds (Dannecker, 2005; Aziz, 2001). Bangladesh, being a labour surplus country, exports a considerable number of workers to different countries (Zamir, 2006). Labour migration from Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon. It started in 1973 when oil price was hiked in the Middle East (Castles, 2003; Dannecker, 2005). Now the fluctuating economic conditions of the Middle East workers have changed their destination and they are looking at a new South Asian country, Malaysia, due to its economic growth. However, groups of male workers from Bangladesh have started to come to Malaysia since the mid-1980s (Dannecker, 2005). It has gradually increased.

Bangladeshi workers started flowing to Malaysia in 1986 when 500 workers came here to work in plantations on a trial basis (Aziz, 2001a). Later on, Malaysia entered into an agreement with Bangladesh for systematic labour transfer. Another

agreement was made between Malaysia and Bangladesh in 1994. Accordingly, annual importation of 50,000 workers specifically in the construction sector was allowed. The agreement was halted due to the Asian financial crisis in 1997. However, according to official records (IOM, 2002), the figure of Bangladeshi migrant workers increased to 385,496 in 1999. During 2007 and 2008 Malaysia witnessed the arrival of about 200,000 Bangladeshi workers (Bangladesh online News, 2007). About 100,000 more were expected to arrive in the country as their intake had been approved earlier. However, in 2008 the situation became complex and uncertain, because at some point Malaysia stopped migration of workers from Bangladesh but later allowed it. The reason was due to the financial crisis. Malaysia stopped the migration and when the crisis was over, it allowed the migration and, thus, received thousands of Bangladeshi workers. Recently the government of Malaysia rejected 70,000 visas which had already been approved (New Straits Times, 2009). Now there are some changes in the Malaysian policy of migration. One of the observations of Bangladeshi migration is that the workers come, work in Malaysia and Malaysia welcomes them because of Muslim brotherhood (Dannerker, 2005).

The United Nations high-level dialogues on ‘international migration and development’ (Martin, Martin, & Cross, 2007), ‘global forum on migration’ and development and international conference on ‘population and development’ seriously discuss the issues involved in migration and ways to provide facilities, better working conditions, safeguard and protection of human rights of the migrants so that they may play constructive role and prove beneficial to the countries concerned. These forums have identified major issues involved in migration. According to Martin, Martin and Cross (2007:10-11), they are:



the effects of international migration on economic and social development; measure to ensure respect for and protection of the human rights of all migrants and to prevent and combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons; multidimensional aspects of international migration and development, including remittances; and promoting partnership and capacity-building and the sharing of best practices at all levels, including the bilateral and regional levels, for the benefit of countries and migrant alike.

These issues can better be understood in terms of the living conditions of the migrants and their adjustment to socio-cultural traits and work environment of the host country.

However, at present thousands of Bangladeshi workers are working and living in Malaysia. It is interesting yet a problematic phenomenon to study their social life, their adjustment to the new socio-cultural milieu, work environment and involvement in professional and deviational activities. The significant aspect of the migration process is the adjustment to the socio-cultural as well as work conditions of the host country. Migrants by and large come from quite different socio-cultural backgrounds and different work conditions. They are acquainted with different norms and used to different work ethics which have shaped their performance and relations with persons at work. They have to work in a new situation with new personnel and have to adjust to the entire new socio-cultural and working scenario. If they cope with the problems which they face and adjust to the situation, they may perform their job well and complete their assignment; otherwise their stay in the host country will adversely be affected. Thus, adjustment is an important phenomenon that affects migrants' stay in the host country, their performance at work and relation with coworkers. Therefore, the present study examines the socio-cultural adjustment of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia and explores its impact on work performance.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The present study concentrates on some of the major aspects of labour migration from Bangladesh. The first is the causes that motivate enormous number of workers to migrate even though the demands of the workers are small (Dannecker, 2005; New Stairs Times, 2009). This requires detailed information about the socio-economic background from which the migrants come and the condition of the area where they used to live in their country of origin. It is also necessary to identify the factors that motivate the workers to choose Malaysia as the country of destination.

Generally there are many factors that inspire people to migrate. The important ones among them are poverty, underdevelopment, good governance, and access to health, education and employment (Zamir, 2006). It is also observed that migration has increased because “knowledge of opportunities around the world has increased and improved means of transport have given people the ability to move long distance at relatively low cost” (Martin et al.,2007:11). The present investigation tries to identify which of the above factors is most prominent among Bangladeshi workers. It is also important, in this context, to know the role of family members, relatives, labour brokers, recruiting agencies of the country of origin and social network in helping and facilitating the migration. According to Lindquist (1993), the mere idea of ‘going abroad’ is very soothing and prestigious. It gives relief and comfort to people and enhances their prestige among their colleagues. Many people migrate for this reason. The investigation also enables us to know the socio-economic barriers that force workers to migrate face many difficulties, arduous situation and even receive low wages.

The second and significant aspect of labour migration is migrant workers’ adjustment to socio-cultural conditions and work environment in Malaysia. The

concept of adjustment is developed by Black (1988) who used it in both subjective and objective ways and applied it to the study of expatriate workers. According to him, adjustment subjectively “is the degree of comfort the incumbent feels in the new role and the degree to which he or she feels adjusted to the role requirements. Objectively, it is the degree to which a person has mastered the role requirements and is able to demonstrate that adjustment via his or her performance” (Black, 1988: 278).

Black refines the concept in his further researches in collaboration with others (e.g. Black & Gregersen, 1991a, 1991b; Black & Stephens, 1989). He modifies his concept in his study of expatriate adjustment based on the works of Nicholson (1984) and Dawis and Lofquist (1984), and points out the differences between domestic employees and expatriates. In this context, he explains adjustment “as the expatriate’s psychological comfort with respect to the environmental demands.” He considers three dimensions of adjustment: work adjustment, general adjustment and interaction adjustment. Showail (2007) explains that work adjustment relates to the psychological comfort with respect to new job roles while general adjustment focuses on psychological comfort with non job-related aspects of the new job (living conditions). Interaction adjustment considers the ability of the foreign workers to interact or have relationships with the natives of the country in which they are working (Showail, 2007: 23). The important aspects of the problem is that other researchers have only studied and highlighted the work adjustment while Black and his colleagues have extended the concept further and analyzed its other dimensions. These facets of development facilitates the researcher to assess the impact of adjustment on the work performance of migrant workers.

The present study attempts to explore three facets of socio-cultural adjustment of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. First, it examines the general adjustment of the

workers to non-work factors in the host country. It relates, as Torbiorn (1982) explains, the general conditions of living such as food, clothing, entertainment and weather. In this context the study assesses how comfortable the workers are with these factors and how much they adopt to the locally available materials. This adjustment is important because it has been observed in various studies (e.g. Takeuchi, Yun & Telsluk, 2002) that if the workers are unable to tolerate locally available food their performance would not be up to the mark.

This is similar in the case of dress code. If foreign workers are not comfortable with the dress code and feel uneasy, their efficiency would be affected. Work adjustment is explained “as psychological comfort felt with respect to the job tasks of the foreign assignment” (Black et al.,1991). According to Black et al. (1991) it relates to ‘role novelty’ that enables us to evaluate how different the present job is from the previous job of migrant workers. It, in fact, indicates what expectations have been attached to the nature of the job.

In the present study, work adjustment will be assessed by the workers’ comfort with the nature of the work including work values, expectations and standards. The fact is that national culture plays an important role in shaping the work environment (Hofstede, 1980). Generally, companies adapt to the national cultural norms. Thus, it is necessary to get acquainted with those norms and practice them in concrete situations. Showail (2007: 28) observes that “cultural differences between the culture of the country in which the foreign worker is employed and the culture of the foreign worker’s home country will have impact on work adjustment, where things in the company are done in compliance with national cultural norms”. Interaction adjustment indicates the workers’ psychological comfort with respect to interaction with the people in the host country (Black et al.,1991). In general, it explains the relation of

migrant workers with the local people. If they have close relationship with local people they understand the problems and position of each other, get better acquainted with cultural norms, living and working standard of the host society and manifest them in their action. The nature of interaction with the natives will affect the work performance of the migrant workers.

The third aspect of migration is the living condition. The place where migrant workers used to live in must at least be hygienic. It should not adversely affect their health because it will be harmful to themselves and to the company with which they work. It will also be a serious loss to the countries concerned. It depends upon the salary, overtime, regular payment, bonus allowances and medical facilities. These factors determine the amount that the migrants spend on the necessities of life and how much they generally save and send to the country of their origin. In this context the roles of the third party and owner of the company are also important as they often take advantage of the vulnerable position of the workers and do not follow the provisions of the contract.

Last but not the least is the work performance and working condition of migrants. It is important to understand how serious migrant workers are about work, how they adopt the norms and standards at work and fulfill the expectations of management. Moreover, the place where the workers work should have proper instruments and facilities necessary for them to perform the specified tasks. These, of course, affect the efficiency of the workers. Besides, working hours, social security, access to gain resources, relation with co-workers, leisure time and religious activities are some of the factors that provide encouragement to the workers and should be assessed to know their roles in the efficiency of the workers. Alternatively, it is also observed that workers are involved in criminal and deviational activities such as drug

abuse, prostitution, illicit relations with women, theft and other activities which should be taken into account to provide adequate solutions.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The proposed study relating to socio-cultural adjustment of Bangladeshi workers and its impact on work performance addresses certain questions that enable us to comprehend the condition in which workers live and work. It will, further, throw light on what challenges they face in working in difficult situation and how they cope with it. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the factors that motivate Bangladeshi workers to leave the country and choose Malaysia as a destination country?
2. How do they adjust to the new socio-cultural condition of the host country?
3. How do they adapt to the new working environment and fulfill the expectation of colleagues and management?
4. What is their performance in work assigned to them and what is their involvement in deviational activities?

### **1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The present study aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. To examine the causes of migration of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia.
2. To find out socio-cultural and working condition in which they live and their degree of adjustment to them.
3. To assess the workers' comfort to work and non-work factors prevalent in host society.

4. To study the work performance of migrant workers and their involvement in deviational activities.

## **1.5 HYPOTHESES**

The research will test the following set of hypotheses:

- H.1. Workers' degree of comfort with non-work factors is positively related with their work performance.
- H.2. Workers' degree of comfort to the norms and standard of work affects their work performance.

## **1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The following definitions are used in this study:

### **1.6.1 Temporary migrants**

According to Jackson (1986: 5), "temporary migration implies that the place of permanent residence is maintained while the migration is away for a period of work in another country or another part of the country." Temporary migrants include tourists, students, business people, and foreign workers. For temporary migrants, an employment pass, dependent pass, visit pass, transit pass, student pass, special pass and landing pass can be issued under the immigration regulation act 1963 (Kanapathy, 2006). For the research purpose, samples selected are temporary foreign workers from Bangladesh. The passes which issued to workers are only for migrants, not for migrants family members. Temporary migrant workers are officially classified as semi-skilled and unskilled foreign workers who earn less than RM2500 a month (Kanapathy, 2006).

### **1.6.2 Socio-cultural adjustment**

The general meaning of culture is “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2002). Socio-cultural adjustment refers to adjustment in the culture of the host country, language, norms and values, interaction, and work, etc. According to Ward and Kennedy (1996: 660), “socio-cultural adjustment deals with the ability to ‘fit in’ or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture as measured by the amount of difficulty experienced in managing everyday situations in the host culture.” Black et al. (1991) propose three distinct dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment: (a) adjustment to the general non-work environment, (b) adjustment to work and (c) adjustment to interactions with host nationals.

### **1.6.3 General adjustment**

General adjustment is the foreign workers’ psychological comfort with respect to non-work factors in the host society such as food, clothing, entertainment, weather, and living conditions (Showail, 2007: 28; Torbiorn, 1982).

### **1.6.4 Work adjustment**

Work adjustment is the workers’ adjustment to work conditions including their responsibilities, abilities, skills, expectations, differences of job tasks from previous and present, etc. According to Showail (2007: 26):

Work adjustment is the foreign workers’ psychological comfort with respect to the foreign assignment as they relate to differing work values, expectations, and standards.

Black et al. (1991) say that work adjustment is the expatriate’s psychological comfort felt with respect to the job taken as a foreign assignment.