

## Exploring the Nexus: A Study of Malaysia-Bangladesh Relations in the Context of Migrant Workers, 1980-2022

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### Abstract

This article examines the genesis of the migrant workers-based relationships between Malaysia and Bangladesh that commenced in the 1980s and persists to recent days, particularly up to 2022. It provides a delineation of migration-related issues including the establishment of reciprocal relations, the commencement of labour migration to Malaysia, associate expenses, wages and remittance flow and the legitimacy of the worker's mobility. The research further uncovers the socio-cultural constraints faced by Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. The enduring connection between Malaysia and Bangladesh dates back to the ancient period characterised by a responsive interplay. Migrant worker issues have emerged as a pivotal aspect of their bilateral ties and were symptomatic with a new bilateral buildout with exercising diplomatic promptness after Bangladesh became an independent country. Employing the historiographic approach as a method, this study synthesises primary and secondary sources such as occasional reports, agreements, newspapers, books and articles. The findings present an empirical account and factual illustration of the reciprocal relationships and their constraints concerning the migration process, financial transactions and legalities of movement. The insights derived from this research would be the source for the policymakers and diplomats enabling them to reshape strategies in light of these perspectives. Additionally, this research paves the way for further studies by addressing gaps in the existing literature on Malaysia-Bangladesh relations.

Keywords: Malaysia; Bangladesh; Workers; Migration; Relationships

### Introduction

Malaysia-Bangladesh relations in the context of migrant workers have created a new domain in their ancestral linkages which has a multi-dimensional trend and evolvement. Ancient Bengal<sup>1</sup> and ancient Southeast Asia maintained historical relationships chronologically connected to the modern entity of Malaysia and Bangladesh in terms of socio-cultural aspects,<sup>2</sup> and following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, both nations further deepened their interactions. During the tenure of Mahathir Mohamed (1981-2003), the socio-cultural bonds between these two countries received significant attention<sup>3</sup> which encompassed various areas of cooperation including recruiting human resources from Bangladesh and many other common aspirations.<sup>4</sup> Reviewing pertinent literature, including books, articles, and other sources related to the area of research aids in understanding the gaps and scope of further study related to a particular area.<sup>5</sup> In this connection, the existing vacuum is that a comprehensive picture of ancestral relationships, the inception of the movement of Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia, and the legal issues that need to be addressed by the workers and

related bodies merely got space in the literature. Moreover, the workers faced different hindrances and challenges regarding migration costs, compensation, habitations and socio-cultural aspects that were not explored in most of the write-ups. The legitimacy of the movements or migration of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia is sometimes questionable to the concerned bodies and needs to be focused on but sidestepped typically. Thus, the main idea of this study is related to a few critical and focal questions; how are the reciprocal relations built, when the worker migration to Malaysia commenced, what is the trend of migration expenses, remuneration and remittance flow and how addressed the legitimacy of the worker's movements? What was the feature of the socio-cultural constraints of the Bangladeshi worker communities living in Malaysia? Considering these queries and limitations and to meet the existing vacatness of work, this research examines the dynamics of the relationships built between Malaysia and Bangladesh, the constraints and shortcomings in the migration process, investment and earning, remittance and economic contribution. The socio-cultural aspects like the habitation and position in the Malay society of the migrated workforce from Bangladesh to Malaysia are also analysed. Hence, the major argument is the bilateral relationships, migrant workers-oriented new engagements, the issues related to the migration process, illegal migrations and socio-cultural reciprocations between these two countries.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century was symptomatic of further bilateral buildout in workers' migration, Islamic brotherhood, societal issues of professionals, education affairs, and other cultural exchanges. This article narrates the inheritance picture and the outset of 21<sup>st</sup>-century relations. Since the aspect of the worker's migration is a tremendously iterated subject, the social position and picture of the people working in Malaysia from Bangladesh have significance in the discussion of bilateral relationships. In the late 1970s exporting of workforce from Bangladesh was started. At this time, the Southeast Asian region was progressing with huge development activities that needed a huge number of workers, and as a result, foreign workers got an opportunity to enter Southeast Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> Malaysia expressed keen interest in importing workers from Bangladesh to materialise its industrial investment this time.<sup>7</sup> From the 1970s to 2022, economic and social relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh were principally based on labour migration. This study applies the historiographical approach and literature-based qualitative method. The hypsographical approach narrates the facts maintaining historical chronology that provides a comprehensive narration. Several reports, files, agreements and newspapers offer optimal information alongside the secondary works of literature. Different occasional and annual reports have been analysed as primary sources produced by government and non-government organisations. Government agreements and documents have also been examined. It has also consulted some unexposed official reports through archival research that provides essential, original data and information. The succeeding sections of this article are structured to first present the historical context and the connection between Malaysia and Bangladesh followed by the commencement of the formal relationship. This is followed by an exploration of the initiation of formal diplomatic relations and a delve into the complexities of worker migration, encompassing the financial implications, compensation, and the socio-cultural dynamics experienced by migrants. In addition, the discourse addresses the legal challenges faced by migrants in Malaysia the culmination of this article with a prospective analysis, offering insights into potential future developments in this bilateral relationship.

### **Commencement of Early Contact**

During the ancient period, there had been established migratory movements from Bengal

to the Malay Archipelago that created a foundational historical linkage between Malaysia and Bangladesh. Examining the established norms of their relationships is required to gain a deeper understanding of the subsequent interactions that have shaped their bilateral ties. Malay territory was known as the 'Golden Khersonese' or the Peninsula of Gold because of the availability of abundant resources.<sup>8</sup> Malaysia's prehistoric culture was revealed through the archaeological discoveries<sup>9</sup> and the Indian culture, in the early period, was the cornerstone that paved the pre-modern and pre-colonial society of Malaya.<sup>10</sup> Following the maritime trade, Indian products came to the Malay Archipelago through the Bay of Bengal in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE through foreign trade connections.<sup>11</sup> Kedah was a port city of the Malay Peninsula, had been influenced mainly by Bengal traders who travelled from the Tamralipti port of Bengal<sup>12</sup> which shows the ancient Bengal's linkage with Kedah.<sup>13</sup> Before European colonialism period, the newly established Malay state Melaka had a connection with India since the fourteenth century. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British East India Company (EIC) influenced the Malay Peninsula and Bengal. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal-based East India Company supported British power in the Malay Peninsula in controlling the administration of Malaya by establishing a bilateral relationship between the Malay world and Bengal.<sup>14</sup> Later, Malaysia became the founding member country of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), and since 1970, it has had new friends among Muslim nations. Being an independent state and Muslim-populated country, Bangladesh got priority in the foreign policy formulated by Malaysia.<sup>15</sup>

Bengal region established a connection with the Malay world dating back to ancient times through maritime trade linkages, especially during the Gupta period in Bengal that started in the third century BCE and prevailed up to 550 CE. After the Gupta period, Bengal was ruled by various rulers.<sup>16</sup> Before coming to the Pala dynasty rule in 750 CE, there was a sort of instability in ancient Bengal<sup>17</sup>, and the Pala rule continued for around 150 years from the mid-eighth century. After that, Chandra, Varmans and Sena dynasties<sup>18</sup> enjoyed ancient Bengal's political power. In 1204 CE Bengal came under Muslim rule with the invasion of Bakhtiar Khilji, and later under the Delhi-based Sultani and Mughal rule.<sup>19</sup> Bengal had a bilateral trade and cultural relationship with ancient Kedah, referred to in the Indian text as *Kathaha*.<sup>20</sup> Indian Emperor Ashok sent three of his royal ambassadors to Kedah to preach the ideas of the Buddhist religion in the fourth century BCE,<sup>21</sup> which shows the cultural contact of Bengal with the ancient Malay world. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the European powers started to come to Bengal, and the Portuguese were the first European nations to trade in Bengal. The British ruled Bengal for around 200 years which is up to 1947, and since then, Bangladesh has been part of Pakistan as East Pakistan. It became an independent country through a 9-month-long bloody war with West Pakistan in 1971.<sup>22</sup> The most pivotal indicator of warm bilateral relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh was Malaysia's recognition of Bangladesh as an independent state, which officially happened on February 25, 1972.<sup>23</sup>

### **Commencement of Formal Bilateral Relationships**

Prior to the initiation of a formal worker migration process in 1986, the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh was established in 1972. During the visit of the first Bangladesh government delegates to Malaysia in 1972, Malaysia assured supporting the admission of Bangladesh into the United Nations and its other agencies. This time, Malaysia expressed its intention to send two experts in rubber production and technical assistance for rice and jute plantations. On the other hand, the Malaysian government received assurance about the re-entry of Malaysian students studying in different institutions in Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) who left the country due to the liberation

war in 1971.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Malaysian Prime Minister (who was also responsible for the Foreign Ministry) informed parliament regarding offering assistance extended to Bangladesh's economy, education and training initiatives<sup>25</sup> and stated about establishing a High Commission in Dhaka and sending commissioner<sup>26</sup> and Malaysia's position on Bangladesh-Pakistan issues and relations.<sup>27</sup>

In such a way, Malaysia and Bangladesh's friendly relationship became much stronger by establishing the high commission in Dhaka in November 1972 and later appointing commissioners. Similarly, in April 1973, the first High Commissioner from Bangladesh was appointed to Kuala Lumpur.<sup>28</sup> The visit of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Malaysia on October 24, 1973,<sup>29</sup> and His Majesty King Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah to Bangladesh in December 1974 signified the two nations' relationship a lot.<sup>30</sup> At this stage, Malaysia co-sponsored the resolution at the latest General Assembly session of the United Nations on Bangladesh's admission.<sup>31</sup> Both countries agreed to do a cultural exchange and educational and technical assistance by sponsoring scholarships and training bilaterally for the students and professionals in both countries and vice-versa.<sup>32</sup> In April 1978, an agreement on cultural cooperation was signed that encouraged reciprocal cooperation in education, culture and sports sectors,<sup>33</sup> and signed an Economic and Technical Cooperation treaty on April 11, 1979. They recognised the areas of relations by denoting historical, cultural and religious ties and similar views on the world situation.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the relationship also extended to aviation service. Both countries connected through passenger flight operations from that period. In this connection, an Air Services Agreement was signed in July 1978 in a meeting of foreign ministers held in Dhaka that determined the airports using permission issues and regularity of flight operation from both sides.

### **Inception of Formal Workers Migration**

Malaysia and Bangladesh gradually opened many new spheres of interaction, particularly through formal manpower migration initiated in 1986.<sup>35</sup> From the 1980s, the economic and social relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh principally were orbital to the labour migration rather than the many other new aspects prioritised. It had a domain of formal bilateral cooperation established through the commencement of legitimate worker migration. This extension of the relationship brought realistic progression for both nations mostly in terms of economic development

### **Bangladeshi Workers Community in Malaysia**

Bangladeshi migrant workers have been employed in a variety of sectors, including agriculture, plantations, services, construction, and manufacturing.<sup>36</sup> A report published by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) shows that in 2000, the service sector employed 231,229 and the manufacturing sector employed 307,167 workers alongside 200,474 in plantation and 68,266 foreign workers in the construction sector<sup>37</sup> where many Bangladeshi workers got employment. In terms of transitional workers' migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia through a formal channel, both countries signed several bilateral agreements, memorandum of understanding (MoU) and protocols that eased the movement of workers and made the bilateral diplomatic relations close-fitting and warm. The history of labour migration to Malaysia from Bangladesh can be traced from the mid-1970s, and till the 1990s, it was irregular and informal. No formal and official bilateral labour agreement (BLA) or MoU was signed before 1992.<sup>38</sup> Since 1984, Malaysia has collaborated with several states, including Bangladesh, over a reciprocal memorandum of understanding to restructure labour migration issues.<sup>39</sup>

The diplomatic involvement in the arrangement of labour migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia happened in 1992 by signing the formal agreement. However, the first test basis migration happened in 1986 for the plantation project with 500 workers.<sup>40</sup> In this connection, the then Bangladesh Labour and Manpower Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuyan visited Malaysia and met with the Malaysian Human Resource Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek in Kuala Lumpur on September 22, 1992,<sup>41</sup> to discuss the related issues over the recruitment of workers. Afterwards, in 1994 another agreement was signed over worker transfer, but the Asian Financial Crisis obstructed that program and was disrupted for several years.<sup>42</sup> At this time Malaysia had a huge demand for human resources for its various development projects taken by the government, and to fulfil that necessity, it officially started to import the workforce from Bangladesh.<sup>43</sup>

During a program in Kuala Lumpur in 1985, the then-President of Bangladesh, Hussain Mohammed Ershad appreciated Mahathir Mohamed for taking a decision to recruit Bangladeshi workers for agriculture and plantation. Both leaders hoped to ensure the interest of the parties would be involved in the process of labour recruitment.<sup>44</sup> The easy availability of the workforce in Bangladesh made Malaysia's authority positive to do worker migration agreements with Bangladesh in 1992. This agreement laid a strong base that created an enduring bilateral relationship between the two states.<sup>45</sup> Under this contract, from 1992 to 1994, around 130,000 people migrated to Malaysia as the workforce.<sup>46</sup> For the continuation of labour migration flow, the second bilateral labour agreement concluded in 1994 by which it determined that Malaysia will import 50,000 labourers every year to deploy in their construction sector.<sup>47</sup> After signing this agreement, from 1995 to 1997, around 102,000 people entered Malaysia which virtually did not meet the target formerly set in terms of the number of persons who would have been imported by Malaysia.

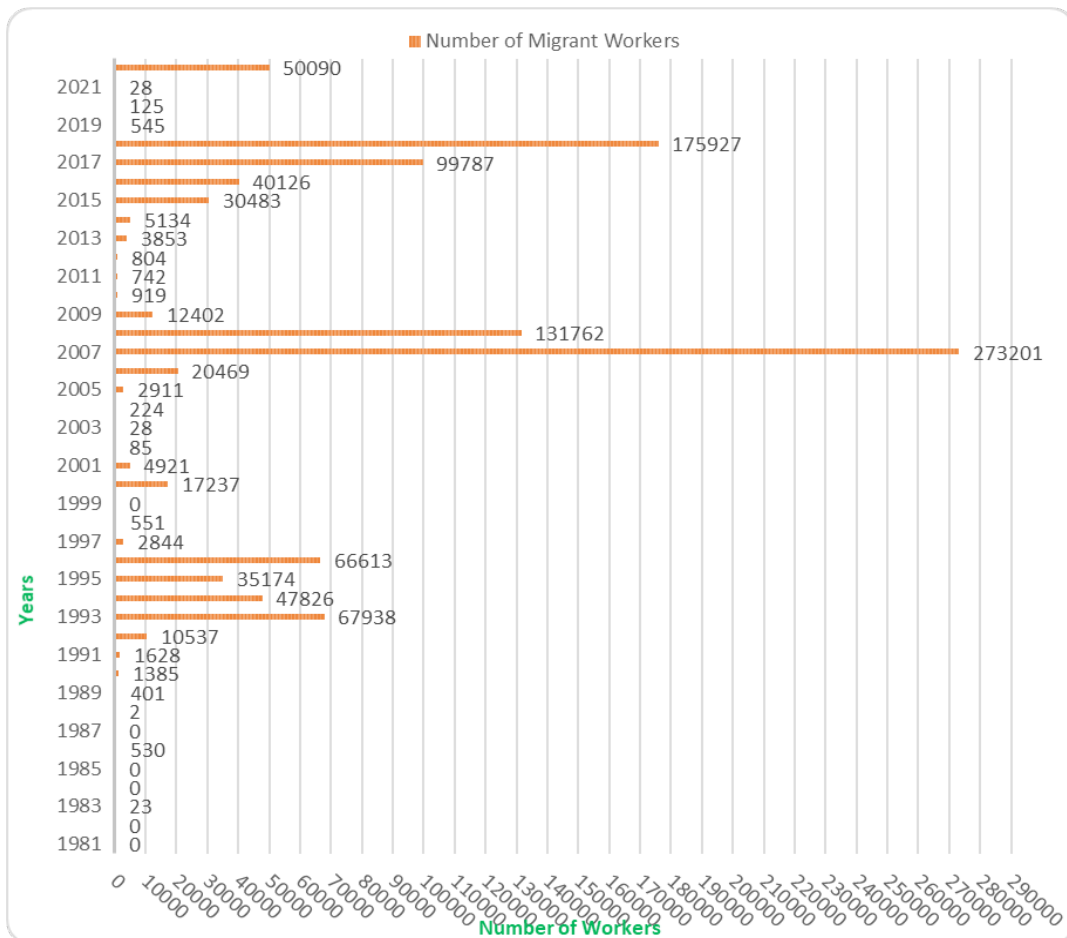


Figure 1: Workers migration flow from Bangladesh to Malaysia during 1981-2022.

Source: <https://bmet.gov.bd/site/page/1baff8ec-27eb-48e0-9ec6-1751cd5411d8/>.

There was a significant reduction in the migration of the labour force to Malaysia due to the economic recession in Asia, resulting in the repatriation of approximately 100,000 workers in 1997. In 2001, Malaysia also terminated the previous bilateral agreement signed over labour migration and, declared an embargo on the official migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia<sup>48</sup> possibly because of the discrepancies created by the agents and migrated labourers. This restriction was upheld till October 2003, and then a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed over the fresh employment of Bangladeshi workers.

The ups and downs of the number of migrant workers entering Malaysia from Bangladesh from the earlier times to 2022 are clearly shown (Figure1,) that presents though Tun Mahathir came into power in 1981, the first two years were blank in terms of labour migration introduced in 1983 first with a number 23. After two years, the flow started again in 1985, and in that year 530 workers migrated to work in an agriculture project that followed a further vacuum in 1987. From 1988-89 migration resumed and increased the number significantly from 1990 to 1998, and from 1993 to 1996 every year around 50,000 people migrated to Malaysia on average to work in different development projects initiated by the Tun Mahathir government in Malaysia. Interestingly the year 1999 was a whole vacuum. From 2000 to 2003 more than 20,000 workers landed in Malaysia from Bangladesh. In 2004, it was started The administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the Prime Minister of Malaysia and it lasted until 2013. In this period, in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Caretaker government and the government led by Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister were administering the country. In 2004 and 2005, the number of migrant workers was around two thousand on average and crossed twenty thousand in the subsequent year. The trend got a huge breakthrough in 2007 with around two hundred and seventy thousand followed by a dropping trend of around one hundred eighty thousand workers and dropped to around twelve thousand in 2009. This time both countries were running under new governments; in Malaysia, Mohammad Najib Razak led the government and in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Up to the end of the Naznt administration in 2013, the number of migrant workers was around fifteen hundred only on average under the government-to-government program for migration. In the year 2015, it was introduced the G2G-Plus program under which around three hundred thousand people migrated to Malaysia to work, and in 2018 trend increased to hundred seventy-five thousand but, Malaysia banned the program because of the allegation of monopoly against the selected recruiting agencies in Bangladesh.<sup>49</sup> From 2019 to 2021 the numbers severely decreased to five hundred on average because of the COVID-19 pandemic and other bilateral issues that again showed a positive increase in 2022 with 50,090.<sup>50</sup>

### **Complying Migration-Related Legal Instruments**

Malaysia enacted several laws and regulations to streamline the migration process which the Bangladesh government accepted positively but, were not complied with by the workers all the time. The sovereign countries use diplomatic tools and techniques to look after the people's cross-border movement today since migration is a more vital part of foreign policy strategies. To address migration-related international issues immense agreements have been signed in the global context. States across the globe use the migration policy as a bargaining tool to pursue security issues, economic interests and others.<sup>51</sup> In this connection, Malaysia adopted several legal frameworks since its independence like the Occupational Safety and Health Act, Workmen's Compensation Act, the Industrial Relations

Act and Trade Union Act etc. Other vital instruments formulated by Malaysia's government were the Immigration Act of 1959, the Private Employment Agency Act of 1981, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2007, and the Anti-smuggling of Migrants Act of 2010. They also established an institutional framework led by essential and concerned ministries where the most substantial body is the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Workers and Illegal Immigrants (CCFWII).<sup>52</sup> Some other regulations were the Employment Restriction Act of 1968, the Labour Accord-1985 and the Special Task Force on Foreign Labour.<sup>53</sup> The government of Malaysia formulated and reinforced such legal instruments to legitimate the migration process, to ensure the safety and security of the migrant people, to facilitate the worker's reasonable remuneration and to confirm the congenial socio-cultural relationship within the people who emigrated to Malaysia and prevailing international relations. Though the legal frameworks are taken to proposition and ensure the highest level of well-being for mankind, these weapons do not work fine all the time at least in the sense of maintaining human rights. Nevertheless, in terms of the relationships between Malaysia and Bangladesh, the initiatives occupied by the Malaysian government facilitated the migration issues at large especially opening and outspreading the human resource transaction. The response and reaction from Bangladesh upon the laws Malaysia enacted was positive that were evident through the various memorandum of understanding affirmatively signed by Bangladesh. Among them the government-to-government (G2G) program penned in 2012, G2G Plus in 2015 and again the government-to-government memorandum signed in 2021 are the major agreements showing the response of the Bangladesh government to the laws formulated by the Malaysian government to streamline the process of workers migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia.<sup>54</sup> Even, in the year 2021, an agreement was signed between these two states to mitigate the labour shortage in Malaysia caused by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>55</sup>

The diplomatic dealings between Bangladesh and Malaysia have significantly been shaped by various international agreements and conventions that Bangladesh has entered into. Among international conventions Bangladesh signed and ratified since independence were the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR-1972) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICEAFRD-1979) in the first decade of its independence; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC-1990) and Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1998) in the 1990s. Afterwards, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Bangladesh signed an agreement on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW-2000). Bangladesh's most essential laws and regulations were the Recruiting Agents Conduct and License Rules 2002, the Emigration Rules 2002, and the Wage Earners Welfare Fund Rules 2002. It also founded formal and informal institutions like the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), The Wage Earners' Welfare Board, the Probashi Kallyan Bank (Expatriates' Welfare Bank), Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) along with many other agencies.<sup>56</sup> These laws, by-laws, acts, rules and regulations have positively or negatively influenced Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia alongside established institutions and organizations. Initially, Bangladesh rectified the instruments formulated by various international institutions that were working for the regulating and well-being of migrant people globally. When the benefits of citizens and national economic development are concerned, Bangladesh also streamlined the legal aspects regarding migrant workers. By formulating many laws and regulations, Bangladesh wanted to ensure the creation of a skilled force of humans, a fair and quicker process of the migration flows, secure the rights of the citizens abroad and border security issues including legit movement of the workers, minimizing the migration costs and so on. Such resourcefulness also did not work fine all the time but helped a lot in maintaining the migration procedure that played a key role in earning foreign currency from Malaysia to Bangladesh.

## Migration Process, Hindrances and Challenges

In the context of the migration process, hurdles and difficulties, migrant workers encountered irregular migration costs, wages, skill sets, industrial security, appropriate residential places and cultural adaptation. Bangladesh is still among the few countries in the world where migration costs are quite high. Though the government fixed the migration cost and working skill for a particular job, the actual migration cost had been higher than the determined one. For example, in the case of migration to Malaysia, in 2017, the Bangladesh government fixed the cost at BDT 38,000<sup>57</sup> but for various causes, the migration cost became higher such as friend and family visas, and free visas for those who do not have the fixed cost determined by the government and not endorsed by the destination countries. Some intermediary groups or agents are active here and make a big chunk of profit.<sup>58</sup> The source of expenditure of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to Malaysia is one of the most frustrating issues. Since they had not been solvent financially, migration seekers used several sources of money to lay behind their overseas employment journey. Most of them collected money by borrowing from others, using self-savings, selling land or livestock, pawning gold jewellery, and using their parents' or siblings' savings. Statistics show that to meet the migration costs, altogether they needed to spend around (Malaysian Ringgit) 4.5 thousand (MYR) during the 1990s. Even, they had to pay extra money to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) to get legal permission to fly.<sup>59</sup>

In relation to the service contracts of Bangladeshi migrant workers, there were frequent instances of discrepancies, extortion, and deceitful practices. An IMO study shows that 46 percent of migrants reported that they did not receive the remuneration indicated in their contracts.<sup>60</sup> Widespread complaints that come from foreign workers in Malaysia are wages paid less than the mentioned one in the agreement, wage deduction without employees' consent, the difference of job type from the original offer, deduction of leave days and rest hours, and poor living conditions.<sup>61</sup> One of the frequently experienced scenes observed in terms of Bangladeshi workers was that they were mostly illiterate and unskilled. This was the tremendously frustrating cause of not getting reasonable remuneration or the extra facilities and opportunities the Malaysian employers usually offer. The migration of unskilled workers was an issue that employers and governments were concerned about. In comparison to the other foreign workers, especially the workers from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, Bangladeshi workers had been less skilled.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, most Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia suffer from cultural maladjustment. Since they cannot work in a single place for long days and transfer from one place to another or one state to another where they live for a short period, they do not get the chance to mix with the local majority of people. This situation offers them cultural alienation, social isolation and loneliness. They are also less capable of understanding and speaking the local language, which works as a barrier to being acquainted with the Malay culture. Sometimes, local people avoid and ignore them even in typical community and religious programmes like in prayer places (e.g. mosques) by considering them as low-profile people. Even though they work hard, and do extra work for their employers and bosses, they are not provided with the right living place, which is sometimes unhealthy<sup>63</sup> where they spend their leisure time watching TV programmes and movies, gossiping, shopping and mainly cooking, and very few of them move to visit tourist attractions in Malaysia. In terms of festivals, a considerable number of Bangladeshi people gather to perform the Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adhah prayers and arrange various religious programmes in different parts of Malaysia privately, at their self-arrangement and own cost.<sup>64</sup> They also arrange programmes on the occasion of Independence



Day, Victory Day, Language Day, the First Day of the Bengali year, etc.

One remarkable issue of socio-cultural relations between the two nations is the 'inter-marriage debate about which, in 1996, the Malaysian Home Ministry announced revoking the work permit of foreign workers who would marry a Malaysian woman. Ministry noted it as the 'marriage of convenience,' and the announcement targeted Bangladeshi men in particular. It is also considered the 'stealing local women qua daughters - daughters who, at best, need protecting or control by the foreigner. Unfortunately, the truth is that most of the time, low-wage workers abandon their wives and children after ending their stay in Malaysia. Such a stance of the foreigners, including Bangladeshi workers, resulted in increased divorce rates that created social problems. Marriage by professionals rather than low-income workers was sometimes unacceptable.<sup>65</sup> However, currently, there has been no barrier to inter-community marriage between Malaysian and Bangladeshi community people.<sup>66</sup> By bearing some conditions, intermarriage is acceptable both in Malaysia and Bangladesh. In this connection, Bangladeshi people get married to Malaysian women when they stay in Malaysia for employment, business or study. Upon completing their tenure in Malaysia, they returned to Bangladesh, bringing their Malaysian wives, and started to live in Bangladeshi society.

### **Worker Migration and Economic Contribution**

The economic progressions derived from worker migration were reciprocally beneficial and substantial for both Malaysia and Bangladesh. The rapid growth of heavy industries and policies regarding that in Malaysia demanded both semi-skilled and more professional and skilled workers.<sup>67</sup> A study shows this time the size of the annual labour force increase in Bangladesh during the 1980s was 3.46 percent<sup>68</sup> because of domestic unemployment which made Bangladesh a favourable source of workers for the developing states, including Malaysia. Since then, because of the diplomatic promptness accomplished by Bangladesh, labour migration has positively contributed country's remittance flow. Research conducted with the support of the ILO has shown every year migrant workers send around US\$ 16 billion to Bangladesh which is 7 percent of the country's GDP.<sup>69</sup> In 1977-1978, the contribution of remittances to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased to 5.2 per cent whereas in the 1990s it was 4 per cent and adding unofficial contribution, it was much higher.<sup>70</sup> The very recent flow of remittance from July 2019 to May 2020 was a total of US\$1120.87 million which is the chronological success for Bangladesh's diplomacy over the remittance sent by the labourers working in Malaysia.<sup>71</sup>

The government and Bangladesh Bank encouraged migrant workers to send their remittances through legal channels accredited by proper authorities in Malaysia and Bangladesh. In recent times, Bangladesh also involved private banks in easing the process of sending and receiving foreign currency earned by Bangladeshi workers.<sup>72</sup> A Bangladesh Bank source has revealed the trend in the growth of remittance that shows since starting of the 1980s, it has had a regular boosting wherein 1981, the total remittance entered around US\$ 400 million<sup>73</sup> and in 2001, it reached around US\$ 2071 million. After 10 years, the total overseas remittance reached US\$ 11005 million. In 2018-19, the flow of remittance from Malaysia was US\$ 1198 million and US\$ 1735 million in 2020, followed by US\$ 1099 million in 2021. In the year 2022, the remittance received from the workforce in Malaysia was US\$ 1044 million.<sup>74</sup> Hence, the flow of remittance was huge but not steady or with an increasing trend rather than remarkable ups and downs because of the number of workers migrated to Malaysia in a varied manner along with other reasons.

## Illegal Migration from Bangladesh and the Bilateral Relations

Irregular migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia happened from Bangladesh through brokers, pirates from Andaman and collaborators from Thailand. Trafficking from Myanmar was and still creates the problem of illegal migrations. The irregular migrants mostly used the maritime route of the Bay of Bengal and the Ocean<sup>75</sup> which impacted the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh negatively and needed to take measures to prevent illegal and undocumented migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia. Such an unlawful migration sometimes creates a threat to a country's human security which happened to Malaysia in making a mess of political, social and economic security that Malaysian police recorded.<sup>76</sup> In this regard, a report published by the US Department of State mentioned that Bangladesh is in Tire-2 and made remarkable progress in preventing Human Trafficking by taking measures through investigations, prosecutions and convictions against the groups engaged in human trafficking while Malaysia took some steps to mitigate trafficking but the insufficient measures kept Malaysia in the lowest tyre of the US trafficking report and because of such reluctant stance around two hundred thousand Bangladeshi workers have been undocumented in Malaysia.<sup>77</sup> As a result, diplomatic discussion on illegal migration was a complementary field in Bangladesh-Malaysia bilateral relations, that sometimes resulted in producing paper instruments to bring intervals in the course of labour migration. Entering undocumented migrants has been a problem for Malaysia since the 1970s. This illegal human movement happened, and job seekers mostly came from Indonesia at that period. Malaysian government restricted undocumented entry in the 1980s by signing an agreement with this neighbouring country and later made a new agreement with Bangladesh and the Philippines to recruit workers as a shield for opposing or preventing illegal Indonesian workers.<sup>78</sup> Foreign workers enter Malaysia from various source countries by using illegal means. In recent years, Malaysia's government signed agreements and MoUs with several countries like Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Bangladesh to disallow this unrecorded migration. With Bangladesh, in 2018, Malaysia cancelled a deal signed in 2016 that was to recruit 1.5 million workers because of exploitation, corruption and illegal entry.<sup>79</sup> On illegal emigration, a considerable number of Bangladeshi people enter other countries through human trafficking and sometimes using other people's passports<sup>80</sup> and Malaysia remains a lucrative destination since the 1980s. In this connection, in the early 1990s, the Malaysian government formulated new laws and regulations that resulted in the prisoning and detention of foreign workers, and in 1997 around 1,000 illegal Bangladeshi migrant labourers confined in Malaysian detention camps<sup>81</sup> compelled Bangladeshi diplomats to expedite their diplomatic enterprises. Malaysia's Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged the Bangladesh government to keep its workers in line. He requested the then Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Hasan Chowdhury to ensure Bangladeshi citizens' appropriate behaviour who had been working in Malaysia.<sup>82</sup>

From the earliest times, people from Bangladesh trespassed on the Malaysian border for which they took the help of illegal agents and intermediaries by using land or sea borders. Both the Malaysian and Bangladesh governments took several measures to stop that practice. Because of the government's ineffectiveness, undocumented migrants from Bangladesh to Malaysia increased hugely even during the 1990s and upwards; in the mid-1990s (1993-96), the Malaysian police caught around 32,000 illegal workers from Bangladesh and other nations.<sup>83</sup> Malaysian government implemented the provision of the Migration Act of 1959 by amending the Immigration Act of 2002 in respect of employing illegal migrants in any

work by any organisation that applies with compelling penalty payment or imprisoning or faces both punishments. It also amended several laws to resist undocumented and illegal migration in the past few years including the Employment Act 1955, the Employees' Social Security Act 1969, and Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Bangladesh passed the Recruiting Agents Conduct and License Rules 2002, and the Emigration Rules 2002 to prevent illegal migration from Bangladesh.<sup>85</sup> Even though governments took several preventive measures to shut down the undocumented labour migration stream, it did not entirely make it effective. Employers who employ illegal foreign workers also sometimes provide shelter for them. Hence, the Malaysian administration has taken two principal measures; firstly, it tried to decrease labourers' unofficial migration by implementing legal instruments. Secondly, it promoted welfare to the labourers to support legal recruitment.<sup>86</sup>

### **Potential Future Developments**

The Bangladeshi worker's migration to Malaysia and their employment and activities are mutually beneficial both for Malaysia and Bangladesh. The phenomena of the relationship between these two states are mostly established based on the transactions of the workers and their interactions. The trajectory of Bangladeshi-Malaysian labour dynamics is principally determined by the initial trends of migration and built relationships, legal frameworks applied by both governments, drawbacks and challenges migrant workers face whether at home and in Malaysia, legitimacy of the movement and their economic contribution kept in Malaysia and Bangladesh. In this analytical lens, it is to be assumed that the prospect for the Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia would remain open but, it may face many more challenges if the Bangladeshi government cannot legitimate the process of migration. In terms of labour migration, a congenial and sustainable bilateral relationship would prevail between these two nations that will bring further economic growth and development for both countries. Since the migrant workers driving both countries' economic development, their future trend would be the streamlining of critical migrant issues that directly impact the relationships in days to come.

### **Conclusion**

The establishment of relations between Bangladesh and Malaysia and their dimensions were diversified and multifactual and of course, signified with few mixed phenomena and few new findings abridged with a bit of discussion. Firstly, workers migrated from Bangladesh to Malaysia were not in a constant position throughout the period, from the 1980s to 2022. Though the connection between these two states was in good standing from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (the early 1990s) to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of migrants was not considerable. This picture was the reality because bilateral relationships sometimes translated into disappointment for Malaysia and Bangladesh due to mismanagement in migration issues. For example, in 1997, Malaysia's government enforced a ban on the entry of Bangladeshi labourers due to several anomalies done by them in Malaysia.<sup>87</sup> Such troubles demand continual bilateral punctuality so that both nations can move forward through the warmest atmosphere, especially concerning worker migration.

Secondly, in labour migration, some obligatory actions were determined by international and domestic standards and agreements ratified by both nations. They followed the procedures and regulations of several international (IOM, ILO, etc.) and domestic institutions that affected mutual diplomatic promptness, and the labour migration issues were impacted extremely by those approaches whether positively or negatively. The government and non-government bodies concerned, agents and workers themselves did not comply with the rules and regulations formulated by both countries and international bodies. For that, Malaysia and Bangladesh should come together to ease the terms and conditions imposed by international regulatory bodies and their concerning manpower movements to gain mutual benefits from this desired deal.

Thirdly, Bangladeshi labourers are mostly less knowledgeable, unskilled and not conscious of various laws and by-laws related to interim migration for which sometimes they breach the laws concerning payments, working and living atmosphere.<sup>88</sup> Even in 1996, around 70 Bangladeshi workers were beaten by Malaysians that happened in Johore<sup>89</sup> over disputes raised concerning rule violations. In this connection, to prevent extortion created by agents in Malaysia and Bangladesh, in mid-1995, the Malaysian government froze recruitment of Bangladeshi labourers. In this regard, appropriate language, other necessary education and professional skills training should be provided to outbound workers; establishing a language training institute in Malaysia like in Bangladesh would be the right measure for this.

Fourthly, since the 1990s, various MoUs and agreements were penned between Malaysia and Bangladesh to streamline issues of consensual labour contracts. However, both parties are still in a dying position regarding the expenses of the migration cost and a few irregularities in compensation, remuneration and remittance. Enactment of existing laws and by-laws regarding the issue of migration costs, selection of recruiting agencies, determining compensation and salaries, safety and security, and the residential environment are compulsory. Moreover, removing Intermediary parties in the worker recruitment process is a must to minimise migration costs.

Finally, illegal and undocumented labour migration is still an issue that concerns diplomats in both Malaysia and Bangladesh. Decreasing such migration is a prerequisite to maintaining friendly ties between nations. From this viewpoint, multilateral promptness should be expedited both from Malaysia and Bangladesh's end to diminish the illegal migration from Bangladesh.

Therefore, Malaysia-Bangladesh relations would be much more concreted if both nations streamline the migration-related issues and stress societal synchronisation reciprocally which started before the independence of Bangladesh. In this regard, the agreement signed over migrant worker issues and socio-cultural cooperation between Malaysia and Bangladesh should be nurtured with due attention from both ends. There have been constraints and limitations both from Malaysia and Bangladesh in considering the social aspects of the workers that should be addressed so that the general Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia feel that they are cared for by the government bodies. The Malaysian government and Bangladesh mission and concerned ministries took a few programs which do not widely involve the workers. Addressing and complying with these issues can bring further richness to both nation's economic development. Nevertheless, the finding of this study would be the room for the policymakers to understand the perspective and reshape their policies accordingly, and the researchers and decision-makers would also be able to conduct comparative policy analyses

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Bengal” is the geographical area of the Indian subcontinent in South Asia. It was a province in British India called with this name up to 1947. In the ancient period, the Bengal’s territory covered several geographical entities, or the ancient Indian townships called Janapada. These townships were part of ancient India and occasionally, some townships were independent. Moreover, all these ancient townships were under the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. From the Muslim period (13th century) to the partition of India in 1947, it was known as Bengal (see (R C Majumder. 1971. *History of Ancient Bengal*, pp. 1–14 for more details). Usually, to make understand the earliest period of Bangladesh, the phrase ‘ancient Bengal’ uses.

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