

Roles and Social Adaptability of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Commercialised Farming of Cameron Highlands, Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper studies the roles and social adaptability of Bangladeshi plantation workers in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia who are involved in the newly-devised commercialised agricultural farming. Cameron Highlands has recently been identified as a strategic farming area for which many foreign workers including the Bangladeshis have been attracted to perform multifarious activities relating to plantation agriculture. Due to having profound socio-cultural background and proper farming orientation in their country of origin, these Bangladeshi workers are performing positively in the activities at various plantations. The findings of this research indicate that the Bangladeshi migrant workers in particular are adopting some special mechanisms for potential farming in Cameron Highlands but in terms of social adaptability, these workers are facing some challenges in relation to their socio-cultural interaction and living. The identification of these problems relating to foreign workers and understanding their intricate role and activities will allow policy planners to take note of future strategies in regard to protecting the labour sector of this economy.

Keywords: Plantation workers from Bangladesh, Cameron Highlands, commercialised agriculture, roles and social adaptability.

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Recently, profound changes in Malaysian agriculture have occurred with the emergence of newly-innovated commercialised farming due to the initiatives of a group of enthusiastic entrepreneurial farm-owners in the Cameron Highlands. Being ecologically suitable, Cameron Highlands has been identified as a very strategic farming area for commercialised agriculture. This farming system requires the human power of foreign workers who have been brought to Malaysia from neighbouring Asian countries including Bangladesh. The migrant workers from Bangladesh who work in the farming sector have essentially become an indispensable component to this production system because of their efficiency and capability. Accordingly, this research explores the contributions of Bangladeshi migrant workers to the Malaysian agricultural sector as they are working in various farms in Cameron Highlands. In this context, the research ascertains the role and challenges that these Bangladeshi plantation workers face by being involved in this agricultural programme.

The concept of ‘social adaptability’ is extremely relevant in today’s workplace, reflecting an individual’s level of social competence for better adjustment in a particular work environment and situation. From the perspective of the employers, adaptability is ranked the highest along with communication, interpersonal skills and strong work ethics (Christy, 2011). Workers must fit well within the work environment with the ability to anticipate, respond and manage work commitments. Adaptability is an adjustment that workers should have and bring with them to the job. For this research, it specifically includes ‘social adaptability’ referring to those living in accordance with interpersonal, social and cultural norms. The concept is particularly suitable for the application of interpersonal adaptation theory (IAT) (Burgoon, Stern & Dillman, 1995) which seems to be significantly relevant for this research because it is derived from an interaction with a combination of work requirements, expectations and desires (Burgoon, 1997).

This research is guided by two particular objectives. Firstly, it studies a group of Bangladeshi plantation workers who are involved as migrant workforce in the newly-devised commercialised agricultural farms in Cameron Highlands, particularly the various roles they play and the contributions they make in keeping up with this commercialised agricultural programme. Secondly, it also considers their working experience within the context of ‘social adaptability’ towards their workplace environment. Consequently, the research hypotheses cover socio-demographic factors, social provisions and agricultural job scope that accommodate social adaptability among those Bangladeshi plantation workers. The following are the various hypothetical assumptions (HA):

- HA₁: The Bangladeshis’ socio-demographics such as age, educational qualification and economic status increase social adaptability towards plantation work.
- HA₂: Social provisions such as food, accommodation and medical facilities provided for Bangladeshi plantation workers increase social adaptability towards plantation work.
- HA₃: Specified agricultural job scope increases social adaptability towards plantation work.

2. Study Locale, Methodology and Data Sources

Cameron Highlands is located in Pahang, a federated state in Peninsular Malaysia situated at 4°28` north latitude and 101°23` east longitude. It lies between 1,070 and 1,830m above sea level. The estimated land area is 71,218 ha (see Aminuddin, Ghulam, Abdullah, Zulkefly & Salam, 2005). Aminuddin et al. (2005) in their research mention that the farmers in Cameron Highlands are the major growers of vegetables in Malaysia which is ecologically supported by its favourable climate. This research also reports that 50% of the agricultural lands of Cameron Highlands are occupied by vegetable cultivation and the remaining are used for growing tea and other crops. But nowadays, tea production has drastically been reduced perhaps because of the shortage of technical manpower. It is therefore quite likely that many of these tea plantations are now shifting towards vegetable cultivation causing many migrant workers to come to this area as farm labourers to work in the agricultural sector in Malaysia. Bearing this in mind, this research purposefully generates both quantitative and qualitative

data from these agricultural farms that employ Bangladeshi migrant workers to enrich their commerce and business.

Data for this research are ascertained through an extensive survey and face-to-face interviewing of 200 workers with a set of pre-designed structured questionnaire. Based on convenience random sampling, these workers have been identified through the snowball technique from commercialised farms located in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. Apart from the survey, the research also additionally selects 15 workers and 10 farm managers for in-depth interviews. To supplement it further, the research also relies on an FGD containing a sizeable number of worker-participants to identify their role and contributions to Malaysian agriculture. Thus, the survey allows us to triangulate the quantitative data with that of qualitative, making the research more reliable and valid and thus reveals the contributions of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the newly-installed commercialised agricultural farms in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia¹¹.

3. Delineating the Role of Migrant Workers in Agro-Plantation Sector in Malaysia: The Review of Literature

Research on plantation farms in the past within and outside Malaysia often dealt with the economic perspective, focusing on their productive value and economic exchange benefits (see Ramachandaran, 1994). There are also a few geographical studies stressing on the area of specialisation perspective (see Gregor, 1965). Both of these dimensions, however, ignore the labourers and their contributions in this context; it has thus encouraged us to take up this proposed research from the socio-anthropological perspective.

The evidence suggests that migrant workers around the world are performing different types of activities in multifarious development sectors (see Power, 1979; Ong, Chan & Chew 1995; Ahmed, 1998; Karim et al., 1999; Abdul-Aziz, 2001). Their demand in the labour sector has increased due to extraordinary expansion of the development sector related to commerce and industry. From that perspective, the concept of migrant worker has now become a global issue encouraging academics to undertake research on this particular topic. Despite being a major economic sector of many developing countries, due attention has not been paid in this respect for which labour studies relating to agriculture remain fully undertaken. In the subsequent pages, we have reviewed some books and papers which seem to be relevant to our research.

Lai, Collins and Brenda (2012) published a book entitled, 'Migration and Diversity in Asian Contexts' considering migration as a process where diversified human capitals come together and face multi-faceted socio-cultural challenges and opportunities. It mostly focuses on those challenges and opportunities that migration process brings to the people of East and Southeast Asia. They view migration in Malaysia from a historical context and regard it as an ongoing process. Since researches at the international and Malaysian front have fully bedeviled and ignored labour studies in the farming sector, this research thus is an attempt to provide information regarding the Bangladeshi labour force in the agricultural sector in the Malaysian context. The main impetus for it comes from a few related literatures which are briefly analysed below.

A research conducted by Ramachandran (1994) shows that for a long time the agriculture sector was the second largest employer of the labour force in Malaysia and accordingly he examines the living conditions of a large number of Indian plantation workers during the British colonisation. Based

¹¹ The principal researcher of this study, Dr. A.H.M. Zehadul Karim had visited Cameron Highlands in Pahang, Malaysia interviewing and informally talking to many of the Bangladeshi labourers working in these commercialised plantation farms along with a few farm managers. While talking to a cross section of people, it was learned that the plantation sector of Cameron Highlands is facing tremendous difficulty in recruiting and retaining the domestic workers due to several factors, and for that reason, as a solution to fill the gap, most of the farms in Cameron Highlands have employed the foreign workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and also from a few South-East Asian countries to work for them.

on historical evidence, the research outlines the roles of capital, trade unions and the state in determining the well-being of the farm-workers.

There are a few researches (e.g., Jackson, 1961; Sandhu, 1969) which focus basically on the labour force related to agriculture in Malaysia during the British colonial period. The British at that time brought in a large number of Indian labourers to work in the agricultural sector of the country. But that situation has now changed where at present many entrepreneurial farm owners in Cameron Highlands have invented a new type of agriculture to grow vegetables and fruits to meet local demands as well as exportation to other countries. This plantation is very much labour intensive for which the farm owners in this sector employ many Bangladeshi migrant workers to work for them. These projects have now attracted the attention of many people within and outside the country and labour being an appendage to the system, has encouraged a few researchers to undertake studies on this issue. Amiruddin et al.'s (2005) and Chan's (2006) writings are very relevant in regard to plantation sector, but a brief perusal of these writings clearly reveals that they have not accorded much importance on the labour aspect, though both of them are significant in the context of Cameron Highlands' agriculture.

Ramasamy (1994) provides us with historical evidence, mentioning that to extract all the benefits from the agricultural sector, British rulers in the past attempted to develop the peasant-dependent agriculture of Malaysia. The process of commercialising Malaysian agriculture started since the colonial period. British officials first hired Javanese labourers as their manpower but since the recruitment of Javanese took more time and money, they hired Chinese and Indian labourers as an alternative. In this book it was written that the first capitalised plantation industry was the sugar factory which flourished in the 1850s. In the same way, when coffee plantation in Malaysia was going to be ruined due to lack of manpower, British officials again hired Indian labourers for low wages in 1888. But they were not enough in number and thus the British had to recruit Chinese labourers as well. However, as the coffee plantation lost its profit gradually, both the British and Chinese planters left it and started to plant rubber using the same workers for wages. From Ramasamy's book (1994), it was discovered that most of the Indian labourers at that time came from the southern part of India and were typically from the lower caste. These Indian labourers were experts in agriculture because of their previous involvement and professional expertise in their country of origin.

A similar observation is also documented in regard to the agricultural farms in the United States which demonstrates significant use of migrant labour, typically in the form of seasonal workers who often are also regarded as guest workers. Due to difficulty in getting temporary visa in their classification as low-skilled performers, many of these workers in this category remain unauthorised in the United States. This is evidently noted in a paper published in *Open Borders* titled 'Migrant Labor in the US: Agricultural Sector' which proposes the use of migrant labour by advocating an expansion of the work programmes and allowing easier legal passage for them (<http://openborders.info/migrant-labor-in-the-us-agricultural-sector>).

Since this sector of commercialised farming of Cameron Highlands is a newly-innovated agriculture and since this farming is mostly performed by Bangladeshi migrant workers, it is therefore quite logical to examine their roles and performances in this sector. As of now, there has not been any study that focuss on the role of migrant workers in this sector in Malaysia. Since plantation agriculture in Cameron Highlands is a potential source of commercial activity, it has attracted policy planners in Malaysia. Being a newly-devised yet intricate issue, this research on Bangladeshi migrant workers is very much relevant and significant. The sheer lack of knowledge and dearth of studies is another important reason for taking up this research which will eventually allow policy planners to understand the roles of the foreign workers and the mechanisms they have adopted in this type of farming in general.

4. Survey Results and Research Findings: Plantation Labourers and Their Challenges

It is evidenced that in the past, European plantation farms had relied heavily on indentured Indian and Chinese labourers for their plantations who have now been taken over by labourers coming from a few South East Asian and South Asian countries (see Ramasamy, 1994; Karim, 2014). Presently, among South Asians, Bangladeshi migrant workers perform multifarious work-activities in all sectors of development in Malaysia, but the records indicate that their first arrival in this country had occurred when a bulk of agricultural workers initially were recruited in the 1980s to work in Malaysian agricultural farms as at that time, many Malays were moving to towns and cities searching for jobs and employment in the urban sector leaving behind them the rural agro-farms almost uncared for, creating an artificial shortage of the labour force in the agricultural sector (see Karim et al., 2015)²². Since then, Bangladeshi workers have remained an integral part of the labour-force in multifarious sectors of Malaysia showing an exceedingly satisfactory rating of job-performance (see Abdul-Aziz, 2001; Abu Bakar, 2002; Dannecker, 2005; Karim et al., 2015)³³. With such predominant trend, the newly-evolved plantation sector of Cameron Highlands similarly has also been relying on the Bangladeshi workers who are found to be diligently committed to their work.

Based on our objectives, this part of the research is substantially dependent on quantitative and qualitative data of plantation workers in relation to their roles, activities and challenges in the work-environment of Cameron Highlands. Contextually, the research identified a total of 200 workers through convenience random sampling and interviewed them face-to face most extensively with a structured set of questionnaire. The qualitative data were generated from the FGDs and informal interviews. Even though this research is based on convenient sampling, the triangulation techniques ensure the validity of the data, providing the findings which are subsequently worthy for further discussion as well as recommendations for policy-making processes.

(i) Socio-Demographic Traits and Working Background of the Bangladeshi Plantation Workers in Cameron Highlands

The tendency for young Bangladeshi workers to go abroad to seek jobs is a very common trend as they are very much instinctually motivated to find employment outside due to an exorbitant unemployment rate and perennial rural poverty in their country. This hypothesis is true in the context of the present research when it is found that out of 200 plantation workers interviewed in Cameron Highlands, 136 (68%) are considered youthful at 39 years-old or less. Numerically, the middle-aged persons are those between 40 to 50-years old, distantly following the previous group, where they numbered 53 (26.5%) in total. Since older persons are usually reluctant to travel outside, leaving their big families behind, there is a very small representation of the labour-force from this category. Only 11 (5.5%) older Bangladeshi plantation labourers are found working in this sector.

Educationally, the workers in Cameron Highlands have had access to different levels of schooling: a preponderant majority of them i.e. 132 (66%) have had some basic education up to primary level, 49 (26.5%) who passed secondary school and the remaining 19 (9.5%) have received

² It is learned that Malays had traditionally been living in the villages (*kampong*) and thus remained content with their socio-cultural and religious adjustment without being bothered much about transition (Clifford 1961). It is often blamed that in social terms, they preferred to enjoy leisure time as their value system discouraged them pursuing individual gain (Silcock 1965:183). Although these views are often regarded as biased, untrue and racist in attitude yet, in the case of Cameron Highlands local Malay farmers were reluctant to accept such menial works perhaps because of the reason that their recent extraordinary economic and infrastructural development of the nation make them attracted to other urban professions.

³ This research on commercialised farming of Cameron Highlands also interviewed 20 farm managers and entrepreneurs who have provided us with enormous data on this aspect of the research. Almost all the management people have expressed their satisfaction over the performances of the Bangladeshi workers. This view has also been found in other studies in this context (see Abdul-Aziz 2001; Dannecker 2005; Karim 2013).

higher secondary education by attending colleges. It seems that rural communities at present put reasonably higher value on education. This is due to the recent availability of many *madrasha* (religious school) and schools in the rural areas. Since most of the workers recruited in the plantation sector have their roots in villages, it is quite obvious that they have some previous exposure to agricultural work. This is indicative from our data where 147 (73.5%) plantation labourers mentioned that they did some agricultural work while staying in the villages. For that reason, in replying to our further question, they admittedly mentioned that they are not facing any problem in coping with the plantation work in Malaysia. The remaining 53 (26.5%) workers however, unhesitatingly admitted that they did not have any such work experience before their arrival in Malaysia yet, they have been able to learn all technicalities relating to plantation works very easily from their fellow friends and workers while working in the farms at Cameron Highlands.

In order to ascertain the economic status of the workers, firstly we have adopted the most conventional classification method: dividing them into three broad categories: low, medium and high income categories. As many as 156 (78%) workers earn approximately RM1500. The remaining 44 (22%) earn more than RM1500 per month. Most of the workers reported to us that their basic monthly wages are usually RM1000 to RM1200 but they often work over-time to earn extra money. Most of the labourers prefer working over-time as many of them had borrowed money from their friends and relatives to bear the expenses of their air-passage and also to make payment to the brokers, middlemen and agencies which had helped them officially to come to Malaysia. In procuring this money, many workers had to sell their tangible and intangible properties at home. To compensate such economic loss, they have to work hard to make the repayment. This kind of economic challenge forces these workers to disregard their physical permissibility which often causes them to get sick, creating health hazard. Whatever may be the income, these workers however, have to maintain themselves economically in Malaysia, and additionally, have to remit a certain amount of money for maintenance of their families at home every month. Although a few labourers earn more than many by working over-time, they are only given regular payment violating the international labour rights as prescribed in trade union rules.

Thus far, HA₁ of the research consistently finds that the Bangladeshis' socio-demographics certainly influence their social adaptability towards plantation work. Young age, minimal academic qualification and low economic status indirectly compel them to adjust easily to any harsh conditions while working at farm plantations in Cameron Highlands.

(ii) Food, Accommodation and Medical Facilities of the Workers

Since plantation workers of Cameron Highlands have to work diligently throughout the day, it is therefore, quite logical that they always give priority to their food-intake, spending a good amount of their earning to satisfy their daily food consumption. The workers relatively cook and share food in groups rotatively sharing their own cooking and they prepare their own food based on their own taste. Although the workers do not have any complaint regarding food in Malaysia, they seem to be very much unhappy about their living accommodations and medical privileges. Most of the workers live in congested rooms where they are crammed with ten to twelve people in one single room of around 200 to 300 square feet, a corner of which is used for cooking purposes. These rooms are very unhygienic and unventilated, having very low standard of sanitation.

Apart from this, they further face the most crucial challenge in regard to their health.. Almost all workers mentioned that they are not provided with any medical facilities nor are there any provisions for treatment of ailments. It is learned from our field data that due to this reason, most of the workers often bring medicine from their own country and use them without consulting a doctor or a pharmacist when they get sick at the workplace. While responding to our FGDs, a few of the workers

expressed their dissatisfaction about not having any medical facilities from the companies. Thus they often go without any proper medical treatment⁴⁴.

Following the HA₂ set by the research, the lack of social provisions such as food, accommodation and medical facilities for Bangladeshi plantation workers indirectly creates obstacles to their well-being and adjustment to work commitment in the agricultural plantation.

(iii) Work-Activities and Workers’ Occupational Combinations Relating to Plantation

The plantation work is a combination of multifarious works performed by the labourers comprising activities like preparation of the well-dug soil for plantation, harvesting the plants, clearing unwanted weeds, insecticide protection of the plants and the overall gardening process which the workers and the farm owners regard as ‘gardening’. In addition, plantation of fruits and vegetables also simultaneously require enough irrigated water and sufficient fertilisers and manures. Since plantation farming is a type of soft agriculture, the implementations and tools used for this pattern of economic production are very light being ancillary to this type of cultivation. It is found that in terms of occupational distribution, the workers in our survey seemed to be a slightly different from those of other socio-demographic research. Plantation workers have to perform all activities relating to plantation of fruits and vegetables routinely as assigned to them by their supervisors and the Bangladeshi workers in Cameron Highlands are no exception to this.

Almost all the labourers working in Cameron Highlands perform all types of plantation activities, starting from planting to packing the products for sale and export. In terms of proportion, 3.5% of the Bangladeshi workers with their long ‘ten to twelve years’ of experience are often employed as supervisors to look after everything of the plantation. The remaining 80.5% of the workers perform other activities like harvesting, gardening, weeding, manuring, plucking and finally packing them as finished products to be sold in the market or to be exported outside.

It is indicative that the majority of the workers are engaged in all sorts of plantation works, though a few of them have some specific activities. We may now examine the specific activities of 200 plantation workers of this study obtained from our survey as shown in Table 1. Table 1 raises an observation that these Bangladeshi plantation workers manage multifarious plantation works without clear job specifications, which may in the future end up decreasing their social adaptability for agricultural work.

Table 1: Occupational Categories and Type of Activities Performed by Plantation Workers in Cameron Highlands, Pahang

Type of Activities	Number of Workers Involved
Managing plantation	9 (4.5%)
Gardening, watering, manuring, nurturing and plucking plants	161 (80.5%)
Weeding and removing unwanted plants and grass	9 (4.5%)
Supervising the overall and specific work	7 (3.5%)
Processing and packaging for export outlet	9 (4.5%)

5. Conclusion

This paper on the roles and social adaptability of Bangladeshi plantation workers depicts the fundamental question as to how the plantation sector in the Cameron Highlands has emerged as one of the most useful economic sectors of the country. Prudently, the authors’ contention here is to affirm that this plantation sector of Cameron Highlands has prospered gloriously through the sincere and

⁴ Since the Bangladeshi plantation workers as well as the foreign workers in general working in Malaysia do not receive any medical privileges or facilities, we suggest that the foreign missions from their respective countries should find out some alternatives to solve the issue.

hardworking roles played by a group of foreign workers from Bangladesh and accordingly, the paper narrates their participation closely describing the roles played by these workers in the plantation sector in Malaysia.

The objectives of the research were attained where this paper submits a case study on the Bangladeshi plantation workers involving migrant workforce in the newly-devised commercialised agricultural farms in Cameron Highlands, particularly in performing various roles that may contribute to the up-keeping of this commercialised agricultural programme. These workers are basically working in the same area of occupation in their original country. Bangladesh is predominantly an agrarian country having 70% of its people living in villages. It is quite likely that most of the Bangladeshi people have some minimum exposure to farming activities. Our research findings indicate that among the plantation labourers interviewed in Cameron Highlands, at least 80% of them have been found to have spent their early years of life in villages or have remained engaged in agricultural work in villages which typifies very clearly their adjustable roles in the plantation sector in Malaysia. Their various roles in the commercialised agricultural programme have contributed to the development of the plantation sector in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. One of the research objectives considers Bangladeshi farming labourers' working experiences within the context of 'social adaptability' towards their workplace environment. Based on the different socio-demographic factors considered namely age, academic qualification and economic status, these Bangladeshi workers are found to be able to adapt and adjust to the new socio-cultural environment. However, deeper analysis of the findings based on interview sessions found the anticipated worker-organisation problem in the future. The problem may arise due to their inability to correspond appropriately to the work requirements, expectations and desires based on interpersonal adaptation theory (IAT). A literature by Ramanujan (2015) finds that academic deficits for example, can initiate a social withdrawal which may lead to aggression. In a well-confined locale such as in Cameron Highlands that is away from the 'home' country, a clear guideline of the minimum age limit and academic qualification standard for these Bangladeshi plantation workers is suggested.

In this case, the policy makers may introduce a well-balanced working guideline for a convenient accessibility of those basic necessities for the Bangladeshi plantation workers, especially when their work setting is away from urbanised locality like in Cameron Highlands. Thus, this research finds that the agricultural job scope must be clearly defined and specified in order to increase Bangladeshi workers' social adaptability towards plantation work. Furthermore, social provisions such as food, accommodation and medical facilities for Bangladeshi plantation workers must be well-taken care or else lack of these may indirectly create uneasiness for them to adjust themselves in the plantation. The policy makers must introduce a well-balanced working guideline for a convenient accessibility of those basic necessities for the Bangladeshi plantation workers, especially when their work setting is away from the urbanised locality like in Cameron Highlands. The findings deriving from this research also discover avenues for further research projects, particularly applying the interpersonal adaptation theory (IAT) on these workers and accordingly this research suggests for further research on the issue to be conducted.

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