

Bangladeshis Students in Bangkok, Thailand: A Preliminary Report¹

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Living in the age of globalization, we can find so many migrants almost everywhere in the world today. This essay focuses on one of the most specific types of migrants, migrants for getting higher education, i.e. student migrants. As Thailand rising to be a newly industrialized nation and its capital city, Bangkok, growing to be one of the megacities in Southeast Asia, we find so many student migrants from Bangladesh there. The first part of this essay describes on the background of this study as well as on the outline of the migrants from Bangladeshis in Bangkok. The second part focuses on the student migrants from Bangladesh. This is just a preliminary study and we will investigate more deeply in detail on this matter in future.

I. Bangladeshis in Bangkok

1. Migration (Emigration) Situation in Bangladesh: An Overview

Until very recently, Bangladesh is most typical one of the Least Developed Countries and she is very famous for its poverty.² As a country in such a condition, Bangladesh sent out many migrants, officially or unofficially, for the purpose of labor and earning money. From the British era to Pakistan era, many people headed to England as destina-

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2 This situation is drastically changing in recent days. The garment sector has developed significantly and this is the driving force of Bangladesh’s rapid development. Goldman Sachs investment bank identified Bangladesh as one of “The Next 11”, having a high potential of becoming the world’s largest economies in the 21st centuries after BRICs, in a paper published in December, 2005.

tion, because British Empire colonized then eastern Bengal (largely same as East Pakistan later and, now, Bangladesh). Most of them were people of Sylhet, north-eastern part of Bangladesh, as they were very famous for their ability to navigate and most of the migrants were sailors. Some of them has settled and built up a significant scale of Bangladeshi descendant's community in large cities in England. After the independence, the destination of the emigrants from Bangladesh has largely changed from England to newly-emerging oil rich Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, UAE, Libya, etc. From the 1980s on, new destinations has been emerging. They are labor-short East Asian countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and newly emerging Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore or Malaysia. But, after burst of economic boom in Japan in 1991, Japan had started to close its door to the un-documented foreign workers. Those who wanted to go to Japan had been asked for the formal visa which specifies the purpose of visit except working, such as business or study. It became very difficult for Bangladeshis, who wanted to go to Japan for work, to get a visa to visit there. In the case of Korea and Taiwan, their governments decided to permit some foreign labor workers on the conditions that they had some skill, some education as well as document etc. Then, it was also very difficult for the persons who wanted to go there for the purpose of working un-officially. After 2001, New York 9/11 tragedy, many Western countries tended to review their migrant policies and more or less tightened the immigration procedure, especially for those who come from so-called Islamic countries. As Bangladesh was one of such Islamic countries, not only migrant workers of Bangladesh, but even businessmen and students also tended to be declined to enter the Western countries. Facing such a situation, many Bangladesh workers again headed to Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar etc., or to Malaysia.

2. Bangkok as a Hub of Migration

In the case of migrants who wanted to go to East Asian countries, especially to Japan, in 1980s or 1990s, they usually had to once get off the air plane in Bangkok, Thailand, and had to get a new air ticket for Japan, after leaving from Dhaka, as there was few direct air flight from Dhaka to Japan. As time passes, migrants and those who wanted to sneak into Japan had gathered in a specified place of Bangkok. The place was the out-skirt of Pahurat area, so-called "Indian Town", situated just the west neighbor of the China Town, and it turned to be a "hub" of migration for Bangladeshis. The exact reason why this

place transformed to be a hub was unknown for the authors now, but, it is plausible and most probable that the place was a part of “Indian Town”, even though it was to be an outskirt of the area, and it seems easy for Bangladeshis to accustomed to the place as they are also South Asian origins. They stayed the place for a while and arranged their tickets to Japan as well as collected the information on Japan and how to migrate there, ex. how to go to some places where many Bangladeshis stayed after entering Japan, how to communicate with the predecessors in Japan, how to get a job, etc. In the late 1990s, especially after Southeast Asian currency crisis in 1997, the number of Bangladeshi migrants gathered in the area had drastically decreased, partly because the economic condition of Japanese society was worsen because of the sudden decline of the economic boom (so-called the burst of economic “bubble”), partly because the economic condition in Thailand was downgrade rapidly, and mostly because the Globalization process was going on in the large scale.

Beside this, new types of Bangladeshi migrants were emerging in Thailand at the same time. Most typical groups were and are those who participate with the business and with higher education in the universities or graduate universities. The authors discuss here about the Bangladeshi students studying in the international program in universities or graduate universities in Bangkok or its suburban area. From 1990s on, some universities in Thailand, especially private universities, set up “international programs” in their courses offered. These programs were taught in English and set up following the international degree criteria. This makes Bangladeshi students who wanted to study abroad easier to access universities in Thailand.

This is a preliminary report on its nature. The following part of this report is a result based on the short interviews with the Bangladeshi students studying in Bangkok or its suburban areas. The findings and comments designated here are very interesting, though, each of these points will have to check one by one in future in a full fledged and detailed study. In this sense, all the statements presented here are tentative ones.

II. Bangladeshi Students in Bangkok

The report presented what follows is compiled from short interviews with Bangladeshi students studying in some universities in Bangkok and its nearby area. The interviewees and their characteristics are listed and showed herewith. As the report

List of Interviewees:

No	Name	Age	Sex	Degree	Education Institute	Interview Date
1	A	46	M	PhD	Mahidol University	07 th February 2010
2	B	29	M	MBA	ABAC University	07 th February 2010
3	C	38	F	PhD	Mahidol University	18 th February 2010
4	D	35	M	MA	Rangsit University	18 th February 2010
5	E	28	F	MBA	ABAC University	23 rd February 2010
6	F	42	M	PhD	Mahidol University	08 th March 2010
7	G	24	M	BA	Ramkanhang University	09 th March 2010
8	H	41	F	MA	Mahidol University	14 th March 2010
9	I	39	F	MA	Professional Training	19 th March 2010

based on their remarks only, some of the contents show contradiction and some are doubtful. But, to acknowledge of every contribution by them, the authors did not manipulate or make a change with their sayings.

1. First Generation Migration: Absence of Educational Consideration

Historically Bangladesh was never a destination for Thai migrants. On the other hand, Thailand was also not a popular destination for Bangladeshis; though a significant Indian (mainly Panjabis) has migrated as first generation migrants in round one century before. There is also significant number of migrants from neighboring Myanmar; both of these two groups are often mistakenly understood as Bangladeshis. Mr. D mentioned that interestingly, there was a small number of Bangladeshis, which never exceeded a thousand (mostly from south and southeast parts of Bangladesh), had migrated to Thailand for trade, nearly at the same period of hundred fifty to two hundred years ago, when Indians were moved here. However, almost all of this first generation of Bangladeshi migrants was returned to the home country within a generation, which was then better in economic position. Besides, because of the economic conditionality it seems the people from the Bangladesh, which was a part of the then Indian subcontinent, was always wanted to live within their comfort zone rather to explore a new area for possible long-term migration. This was the assessment of Mr. B about the early Bangladeshi migration to Thailand. In addition, there were sections of Buddhist priest who had been moved back and forth between these two countries for religious education.

This helped to have cultural exchange and sharing literatures. But the scale of such educational exchange had never reached to a significant stage.

2. Education Has Started Taking Place in Second Generation Migration

The second generation Bangladeshi migration started in sixties. According to Ms. H this was the time when a few Bangladeshis were cross Burma and started to landed to Thailand to find economic fortune. The inspiration was mainly economic activities and trade. Moving to third country was also been witnessed during those days. Mainly the poorer sections of Bangladesh were migrated during those days. The destination then was round Bangkok. Few of them actually managed to stay and started business permanently. This business community hasn't targeted international or domestic market. Most of the businesses are small and medium scale and failed to leave a significant social impact. This was mostly initiatives of individuals rather group. Mr. G characterized this section not engaged with education but their children have started to educate in Thailand.

Later the internal context of Bangladesh society has contributed to start education migration. After the inception of Bangladesh in 1971, mainly from 1980s on, a significant number of Bangladeshi students were moved out of country mainly for higher education. On the other hand, Thailand has started to more open to international students and started modernization of the education system. However, the education migration from Bangladesh remains only within certain class of people. Mr. F mentioned that education in outside country was expensive, which has resulted only the rich Bangladeshi students to enroll mainly at the private universities of Thailand. Though this was not the first option for the parents, rather the students have inspired by their fellows those who studies in Thailand. Eventually they have influenced their parents to allow them to pursue their education in Thailand. So this was a trend of some students from specific areas or institutions of Bangladesh. Mr. G noted this trend as remarkable. He pointed this as one explanation of the Bangladeshi education migration to Thailand of not being need based and hardly had any clear linkage with the inspiration of popular subjects. During the same period some family just thought it as ornamental to send their children to outside Bangladesh. Not necessarily focused on the type and quality of education rather they were mostly interested for the foreign certificate. Ms. C believes that some of them have selected Thailand for that purpose as it was cost less and had relatively easy to enroll. Despite every drawback this was a good beginning of Bangladeshi migration

for education in Thailand and continued to recent phase.

3. Recent Trend: Confused Direction for Education Migration of Bangladeshis

Early nineties was the period when the pick of education migration of Bangladeshis to Thailand took place. If we count this period as the beginning of resent trend of education migration of Bangladeshis in Thailand, the number seems gradually decreasing since mid of first decade of 21st century. With the economic growth Thailand has offered handful of international programs. This has further accelerated by the Southeast Asian economic crisis in 1997. The experience of the crisis has made Thailand to take strategic approach of the education policy and eventually Thailand has promoted their education for international audience as well as attempted to internationalize their education institutions. At the beginning this has resulted migration of a good deal of Bangladeshi pupils to Thailand. In this process not only the private institutions but also the inter-governmental cooperation has attracted students from Bangladesh. There are also exchange program, short term and long term professional trainings offered for targeted Bangladeshi pupils through the patronage of Bangladeshi government. Certainly varieties of skill development program generated in the field of agriculture, management and information communication have engineered. Mr. D viewed this changes linking with the domestic demand in Bangladesh in technological and management area. Thailand has offered a cheaper way to achieve such skill. However, none of those educational initiatives haven't lead to long term migration and fail to integrate the migrated population even of its tiny portion in Thailand society. According to Ms. I, the momentum is lost but there are changes to revive depending on the cultural and political cooperation between the two countries. Though the Muslim population in Thailand is significant and those are culturally closer with Bangladeshis, there is few Muslim Thais to be interacted with the migrated Bangladeshi students. Ms. F has explained this phenomenon with the condition of Muslim within Thai society. Since they are yet to be part of the Bangkokian upper class, they consist relatively lower number in the expensive international program of the private universities, where most Bangladeshis are enrolled.

Another important dimension has been revealed by Mr. B. He mentioned that the current generation of Bangladeshis migrated to Thailand for education is highly ambitious. This section of Bangladeshis is not satisfied only with a certificate, rather they are keen to lead their carrier in the respective fields. Mr. D put this context as a

change in understanding of foreign education by Bangladeshis. According to him there might be two reasons behind this phenomenon. Firstly, the riches are not the only people sending their children for higher education in Thailand rather growingly but surely the middle class Bangladeshis are sending their children to abroad and in this case to Thailand. The middle class sentiment for education is not for the certificate. They have been relying on better education for their livelihood meaning, i.e. this is important for their carrier. This ambition drives them to pursue education and lead to some job opportunities. Thailand has been providing the education opportunities but hardly making any room for hunting jobs for Bangladeshis. Since the migrated population can have better job opportunities during and after education leading their carrier in other countries they tends to invest selecting their main destination in Europe and America. Secondly, with times Bangladeshis are offered higher education through its relatively new sector of huge numbers of private universities in Bangladesh. This is tapping the rich and middle class demand for education in country.

Parents are often reluctant to send their children outside as they have better institutes within their reach. However, these are competitive and mainly offering subjects commercially viable. This leaves the room for Thailand to take the market of technical education for Bangladeshis. Since the technicians are usually ambitious as they want to have a carrier scope that hard to achieve in Thailand for Bangladeshis. Mr. A viewed this as a structural problem and linked with the difficulties of immigration rules and policies for Bangladeshis. However, Mr. G thinks that this is more a demand-supply matter. The domestic demand for such technical people is usually met by the locals. The value of Bangladeshis in this context is rather supporting through linguistic skill. He mentioned even then the salary is not enough for expects. Despite the difficulties some Bangladeshi graduates often explore the job market in Thailand. Most of them never stay more than a year or two and return back to Bangladesh or move to third country. Ms. E thinks this is because the newly graduates have a little scope to make a family in Thailand.

The recent trend also suggests though the number is less than before but Bangladeshi students are coming to more institutes in Thailand than the previously selective few. Ms. H and E argue this trend as a significant shift of education migration to Thailand. The usual education migration to Thailand was highly centralized to a few education institutes in Bangladesh and every year students and their friends were coming to Thailand to very specific institutes. The number was higher but localized. They have confidence on

those institutes only. Over time, varieties of education institutes are becoming familiar with Bangladeshi students and they are also exploring. This might be a positive trend. On the other side, there are a few Thais moving to Bangladesh for exchange program, focused training and courses on rural and micro economics. This could be a new window for coming days in mutual education migration.

Concluding Remarks

All the remarks and observations presented above are based on the statements of some of Bangladeshi students (a few in numbers) only. We will have to stress on this point again. We will, therefore, have to examine each point one by one through the detailed study with meticulous care from now on. It will surely take a significant time to accomplish it, so we will wait a next opportunity to bring out this future report to the readers.