

An Empirical Study on Bangladeshi Workers in Japan

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滞日バングラデシュ人労働者を対象とした実証的研究

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In recent years, sociological studies on international labor migrators in Japan have mostly centered on the Japanese diaspora and the “Technical Intern Trainees”; there is not enough research on other foreign immigrant workers. The main aim of this paper is to cover such research blanks and highlight the Bangladeshi migrant situation from 1984 to the present. This is made possible through research interviews of Bangladeshis working in Japan and also of the workers who are back in their home country after having worked in Japan for a certain number of years.

Until the year 2000, the employment situation of Bangladeshis was relatively stable; they were working as compensatory manpower for small businesses during shortage, even though they were illegal overstay workers. However, the Immigration Bureau tightened control from 2003 onward and most Bangladeshis without lawful residence status went back. Therefore, a large number of Bangladeshis who now stay and work in Japan are people with lawful status of residence.

近年の社会学領域における国際労働移動研究は、大部分が日系人および技能実習生を対象としたものに集中しており、そのほかの外国人労働者に関する研究は非常に限られている。本稿は、滞日中および日本での就労後に帰国したバングラデシュ人労働者へのインタビュー調査をもとに、1984年以降の外国人労働者をめぐる状況の一端を明らかにし、上記のような研究上の空白を埋めようと試みるものである。

回答者たちによれば、2000年前後までは中小企業の人手不足を補う労働力として、バングラデシュ人たちの雇用状況は比較的安定していた。その点については、不法滞在者でも同様であったという。しかし2003年以降、不法滞在者に対する入国管理局の摘発が厳しさを増し、在留資格をもたないほとんどのバングラデシュ人たちは帰国した。その結果、現在日本に滞在し、就労しているバングラデシュ人のほとんどは、合法的な就労資格をもつ人びととなった。

1. Background of Research

According to the Japanese government statistics, over 1.08 million foreigners, out of the 2.4 million living in Japan, are engaged in some kind of paid work (MHLW, 2016, p.1; MJ website). Overseas immigrants play an important part in sustaining the Japanese industrial society.

A large part of recent sociological studies on international labor migrators focus on two types of immigrant groups: first, the Japanese diaspora and their families who are mainly

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South American natives and second, the “Technical Intern Trainees” (TIT) who stay in Japan and utilize the government’s “Technical Intern Training Program” (TITP) for foreigners.

This is mainly because of following two reasons. First, within the immigrant workers who stay in Japan, the majority are more than 300,000 Japanese diaspora and over 228,000 TITs (MJ, 2014, p.2 ; MJ website). Second, Japanese diaspora and TITs had legal residence status, which came into effect on their first visit to Japan and facilitated lawful employment. Therefore, their jobs and lives are comparatively stable and they are cooperative to various social researches in many cases.

It is a matter of course that most part of foreign migration workers, other than Japanese diaspora and TITs, entered Japan lawfully. In other words, the Japanese government publicly states that migration of foreign unskilled workers is not accepted. Therefore, a considerable number of foreign laborers other than Japanese diaspora and TITs found a way to stay in Japan unlawfully.

Japanese mass media has often talked about illegal overstay workers. However, from 2003 onward, the government strengthened control over them. Thus, fearing exposure to the Immigration Bureau, it became very difficult to interview illegal overstay workers. Accordingly, sociological research on foreign immigrant workers, other than Japanese diaspora and TITs, decreased rapidly from mid-2000.

Besides Japanese diaspora and TITs, 300,000 foreign workers now stay in Japan, and it is said that 63,000 illegal overstay workers live in the society (the Immigration Bureau, 2016, p.4). It is unclear whether they are staying as lawful sojourners or as overstaying foreign workers. However, if their work situation is ignored by academic research, it will leave a large gap in the field of Japanese immigrant studies.

Especially in the late 2000s, the labor environment in Japanese society was rapidly changing. Therefore, conducting empirical research on illegal overstay workers during this period is an urgent task.

The research interviews conducted in this study are of Bangladeshis who are experienced workers in Japan. Included among them are lawful migrants and illegal overstay workers. Some of them are currently staying in Japan while others have returned to Bangladesh.

The statistics of the Ministry of Justice show 10,835 Bangladeshis staying in Japan at the end of 2015. After removing 1,912 international students and 2,456 family sojourners among them, only a little more than 6,400 workers remained (MJ website). There are three reasons why Bangladeshi migrant workers, although representing a small part of foreign workers in Japan, were chosen as the target group of the research :

The first point relates to the range and scale of the research. As mentioned before, more than a million foreign workers stay in the present Japanese society, with the total number of their native countries amounting to over two hundred. However, research targeting migrant workers from hundreds of countries will require infinite labor and funds and its realization in

almost impossible. Therefore, the research method focusing on migrants from a specific country was chosen to realize research with limited resources.

The second point concerns access to informants. For the purpose of research, it is important to secure a certain number of informants. Bangladeshis tend to form close bonds and social relations through communal ties. It is because they often respond to interviews pleasantly, if there are introductions by kinfolk or friends.

The third reason is the inclusion of a Bangladeshi joint researcher as a part of the research team. We believed that having a researcher from one's home country would make it relatively easy to gain the informant's confidence, especially of illegal overstay workers who are afraid of being exposed to the Immigration Bureau.

Unfortunately, the number of interviews conducted after two years of research was not enough because of public safety issues in Bangladesh, including the terror attack that arose in Dacca in 2016, which largely hindered the research. However, the interviews cover the period after the latter half of the 1980s and include multiple informant narratives that have shed light on certain findings on labor and the daily life of Bangladeshi workers in Japan.

2. Previous Research

In the year after June 2015, Bangladeshis received 15 billion U.S. dollars in remittance from migrant workers in foreign countries (Bangladesh Bank website). That amount of money is equivalent to 7.7% of Bangladesh's GDP in 2015 (World Bank website). Overseas migrant workers, earning in foreign currency, are the most important wage earners for the country.

As stated, in the late 2000s, only a few studies focused on immigrants who were not Japanese diaspora and TITs, However, before that period, they had been the subject of a certain number of studies.

According to Miyake, the Bangladesh government began to promote working migrants quite late as compared to other Asian countries (Miyake, 1993, pp.109-118). At the end of the 19th century, many workers from the U.K.-ruled Indian Empire, which included present-day Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, were working away from their home countries in the British colonies of Asia or Africa. However, most of them were natives of Punjab or Gujarat and only a small number of workers were from the present-day Bangladesh. In the 1950s, tens of thousands of Bangladeshi workers went to the U.K. to compensate for the labor shortage in the country, but their numbers were very few as compared to that of workers from West Pakistan or other countries of the British Commonwealth.

In the first half of the 1960s, there were barely any migrant workers from Bangladesh in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Gradually, the number of migrant workers from the country increased due to the rise in manpower requirements in the Middle East. After 1971, the year of independence from Pakistan, immigrant numbers to the Middle East did not decline. In 1976, the Bangladesh government officially decided to promote overseas migrant labor as a national policy and

the overseas diplomatic establishments started to mediate in immigration. The Bangladesh government tried to expand overseas work for acquisition of foreign currency. With the government's backing, the number of overseas immigrants amounted to 50,000 in 1981, and surpassed a lakh in 1990.

After this, overseas migrants from Bangladesh continuously increased in number, from 380,000 in 2003 to its peak of 875,000 in 2008 (Rahim & Alam, 2013, p.25). Although overseas immigrants have decreased sharply due to the global economic slump after the Lehman shock, 400,000 Bangladeshis continue to work in more than 150 countries even now (ILO, 2015, p.2).

It is said that the number of immigrant workers from Bangladesh began to increase from 1985 onward in Japan. Only 451 Bangladeshis stayed in Japan in 1985, but three years later, the number surpassed 12,000 (NIRA, 1993, p.7). Labor shortage was a serious issue until just before the beginning of the prosperous "Bubble Economy." Large numbers of foreign workers visited Japan during that period not only from Bangladesh but from many other Asian nations as well. Most of them entered on tourist visas or study visas, and then unlawfully worked in Japan.

Especially in the case of Bangladeshi workers, many of them came as students of Japanese language schools, since student visas made it possible to stay longer as compared to tourist visas, and then worked legally within the fixed limits. However, fraudulent Japanese language schools gradually emerged that solely aimed at providing illegal jobs, instead of classes, to foreign students. As one of the measures for the problem, the Japanese government tightened the regulation on Japanese language schools at the end of 1986. Therefore, after this, many Bangladeshis entered Japan on tourist visas and worked as overstay workers after their visas expired (Miyake, 1990, pp.31-32).

Despite strengthening regulations, the number of Bangladeshi overstay workers did not decrease and the Japanese government stopped the visa exemption agreement with Bangladesh in 1989. Admittance to Japan had become stricter for Bangladeshi migrant workers, and a large number of Bangladeshis were refused entry into Japan. Moreover, many illegal overstay workers in Japan also came to be arrested. The number of Bangladeshis arrested in 1989 were 2,277 and this number increased to 5,925 in 1990 (NIRA, 1993, p.8).

The Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act of Japan was revised in 1990 and it became easier to work and stay lawfully in Japan for second and third generations of Japanese and their spouses. Immediately, a large number of Japanese diaspora including Brazilians and Peruvians visited Japan and came to be engaged mainly in manufacturing industries. Furthermore, the conventional foreign trainee system was revised to TITP in 1993, and, since then, Japanese diaspora families and TITs have come to hold important roles in the domestic labor market.

On the other hand, the Bangladeshi migrant regulation became stricter and many Banglade-

shis began changing their destination to South Korea and other Asian countries (Yamamoto & Araki, 2009, p.86). Bangladeshis staying unlawfully in Japan numbered around 6,000~8,000 until the early 1990s, and then there was a reduction (Shimohira, 1999, p.257).

Ignited by the coordinated terrorist attacks in 2001, also referred to as the September 11 attacks, the Japanese immigration control was strengthened as an anti-terrorism measure, especially for people from Muslim countries for whom it became more difficult to enter Japan. Furthermore, the National Police Agency released the “Urgent Security Measure Program” and emphasized “Crimes Committed by Foreigners in Japan” as “a factor for the deterioration of crime situation” in 2003 (MPD website).

In response to that government policy, not only did the immigration examination become more ruthless, but illegal overstay workers, who were actually overlooked until then, came to be exposed frequently. It is said that overstay Bangladeshi workers have decreased sharply since then.

3. Research Interviews

1) Informants

Our research on Bangladeshi workers started in February 2016 and is currently under work. It is composed mainly of interviews with people who have experience of working in Japan.

The interviewees are divided into two groups. One group consists of people who had worked for several years in Japan, and then had returned to Bangladesh. Their interviews were carried out in Chittagong, Bangladesh. The other group is composed of people staying and working in Japan and the interviews were held in Japan.

Table 1 shows the time of the first visit and homecoming of all informants irrespective of their return to Bangladesh. The table also includes the data of their residential status shift, educational background, age at the first visit, and job experiences in Japan. The last column of the table shows their present job in Bangladesh or Japan.

While the numbers of informants are not many, the time of their first visit to Japan is exhaustively covered from 1984 to 2008. Their stay in Japan ranges from five years to 27 years. Furthermore, three persons continue to remain in Japan until now. Therefore, the common experiences shared by the informants show the actual situation of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Japan from 1984 to the present.

All fifteen informants are male and were in their 20s at the time of their first visit to Japan; notably, eleven were in their early 20s. Eleven informants entered Japan on student visa, out of which ten were students of Japanese language schools. Three entered Japan on tourist visa and one other on a work visa as an engineer. The Japanese language schools, in which they studied, were all located in the Kanto area and almost all informants found their first job in the area itself.

Table 1 Status of Informants

No.	First Visit to Japan	Back to Bangladesh	Shift of Status	Educational Background in Bangladesh	Age at First Visit	Work Place in Japan	Job at the Time of Research
1	1984	1990	JL→TS	CL	27	Café, Restaurant	Self Employment
2	1984	1989	JL→TS	CL	28	Karaoke Shop, Restaurant, Café	Employee
3	1986	1997	JL→TS→OS	TS	25	Manufacturing, Bar	House Rent
4	1986	1997	TO→TS→OS	MC	23	Electrical Work	Teacher in a High School
5	1986	2004	JL→TS→OS	CL	21	Restaurant	Employee of a Garment Factory
6	1987	2002	JL→TS→OS	CL	21	Restaurant	Owner of a Garment Factory
7	1988	1998	JL→TS→OS	CL	21	Restaurant, Karaoke Shop, Bar, Manufacturing	Employee of a Japanese Company
8	1988	2003	JL→TS→OS	CL	22	Café, Bar	No Job
9	1988	1993	TO→OS	CL	23	Manufacturing, Packing Factory	No Job
10	1989	Stay in Japan	TO→OS→RSM	CL	20	Cleaning Service, Manufacturing, Restaurant, Electrical Work (RE)	Employee in Japan
11	1989	1995	JL→OS	CL	20	Restaurant, Manufacturing	Employee of a Hotel
12	1991	Unknown	JL→TS→OS	CL	24	Restaurant	Employee of an Insurance Company
13	1992	2009	JL→TS→RE	MC	30	Restaurant, Manufacturing (RE)	Employee of a Subsidiary of Japanese Company
14	1994	Stay in Japan	SP→UNV→RE	CL	22	Restaurant, Public Organization, Manufacturing (RE)	Employee in Japan
15	2008	Stay in Japan	RE	UNV	23	Manufacturing (RE)	Employee in Japan

JL:Japanese Language School
 TS:Technical School
 CL:College
 UNV:University
 MC:Master Course

TO:Tourist
 OS:Overstay
 RE:Regular Employment
 SP:Special Course for Foreign Students of University
 RSM:Residence Status by Marriage

The informants have relatively high educational backgrounds. While eleven informants graduated college, two held master's degrees before they left Bangladesh. And one of them graduated university and another graduated technical school. In Bangladesh, only 30 percent of people have an educational background higher than junior high school, in recent years (B.B.S., 2012, p.436). The fact that many migrant workers to Japan have a comparatively high academic achievement is also proved by some previous studies (Miyake, 1990, p.40 · NIRA, 1993, pp.11-12 · Portes, 1995, p.20).

In Bangladesh, like most other countries, educational background is strongly related to the economic status of families, and all informants were born and bred in upper middle-class families. That also appears to be their reason for visiting Japan. None of them came to Japan to support their families financially¹⁾. Their reasons to visit Japan stemmed from their curiosity and adventurous spirit as young men. Many of them said, "I wanted to come to a foreign country anyhow."

2) Job and Residence in Japan

It is in 1983 that the first informants visited Japan. In the case of informant No.1, a Bangladeshi migration broker carried out the formalities for his entry into Japan. However, No.2 took the help of a friend working in Japan instead of using a broker. As referred in the former section, this period saw a rise in immigrant workers from Bangladesh to Japan. However, the experience of No.2 shows that migration depending on relatives had already started during this period.

Among the informants, ten entered Japan as students of Japanese language schools. It was said that the new immigrant's entry into Japan through a student visa sharply decreased after 1987. However, six of the ten language school students came to Japan later than 1987, and among them five went on to technical schools.

According to the informants, they enrolled in the schools with the legitimate purpose of attending classes and studying. One of them said, "The Japanese language school where I studied was very strict about attendance and some students with insufficient attendance were expelled from school."

On the other hand, three informants visited Japan with tourist visa. One of them (No.4) became a student of a technical school later but the other two (No.9 and No.10) immediately became illegal overstay workers.

Despite the visa type, all informants began to work shortly after their arrival in Japan. For the three informants who entered Japan on a tourist visa, earning wages in any form was illegal. Nevertheless, most of the informants on student visas worked unlawfully, as they exceeded the work time allotted to them while studying abroad, even if it was not for the whole duration as they were students. The Japanese government allowed them only four hours per day and 28 hours per week of wage work.

More than half the informants changed their jobs within a short span especially during their early days in Japan, when many of them worked in restaurants or cafes. Most of them started working in restaurants as dishwashers, because their Japanese skills were not sufficient. However, within a couple of years, many of them became fluent Japanese speakers and changed their jobs to higher paid ones such as cook or bartender.

Except for a few who worked as regular employees, most of the informants were working under the hourly wage system in the early stages of their job. However, in some cases, workers worked more than a few years in the same workplace ; hence, their wage system often changed to monthly fixed payment. Most of the informants said that their hourly wage was equal to the wages of the Japanese who engaged in the same work at the same workplace. At least in terms of wage there was no discrimination between them and Japanese workers²⁾.

The ten informants, who went on to technical school after graduating Japanese language school, were lawful immigrants as long as they were students. But the limit of enrollment in Japanese language schools is generally two years and that of technical school is two or three

years at best. Their situation after graduating technical schools was sharply divided. Informant No.13 lawfully worked in Japan as a regular employee of a Japanese company manufacturing electronic components, immediately after graduation. Two informants (No.1 and No.2) went back to Bangladesh immediately after graduation. On the other hand, seven of them decided to become overstay workers. Ten of fifteen informants, including a dropout of Japanese language school (No.11) and three informants who switched from tourist to illegal overstay worker (No.4, No.9, and No.10), have experience as an overstay worker.

The informants who became illegal overstay workers have common tendencies. They worked relatively prolonged periods in the same workplace. For example, informant No.7 worked for more than five years in an automotive spare parts factory from just after he graduated technical school in Japan until his return to Bangladesh. Informant No.5 worked for six and a half years in a restaurant after he moved restaurants where he had previously worked for six years. Similarly, No.10 worked for six years in a precision machinery factory and its affiliated factory, and then seven years in a Japanese restaurant. Despite their unlawful status, some of them have held the post of manager in their own shop or factory, since they stayed in the same workplace for as long as possible³.

The tendency of illegal overstay workers to work in the same place for a relatively long time is firmly related to their illegal residence situation. They cannot depend on the usual job information services and mostly utilize only the Bangladeshi network in Japan for job hunting. Therefore, switching jobs becomes difficult for them and they continue to work the same job, even if they are dissatisfied.

3) Reasons for Returning to Bangladesh

Nine of the ten informants, who experienced illegal overstay, went back home between 1993 and 2004, leaving only informant No.10 in Japan at the time of the research. As mentioned before, the 1990s was the period when Bangladeshi workers in Japan decreased greatly in number. The informants who went back to Bangladesh during this period (No.3 and No.7) had very personal reasons for doing so such as, “since I could not get married due to my increased age” or “due to homesickness and wish to establish an enterprise in my mother country.”

An informant revealed that an Immigration Bureau inspector went to his friend’s workplace and the illegal overstay worker was ordered to leave Japan at the end of the 1990s. On the other hand, some of the informants also said that they thought the Japanese police and Immigration Bureau overlooked illegal overstay workers although they knew of their whereabouts.

For example, informant No.8, who left Japan in 2003 after fifteen years of unlawful stay, attested to the situation around 2000. During the period, he worked as a bartender and crossed a police booth daily while commuting, but he was never scrutinized by the police officers. Furthermore, a police officer regularly visited the bar he worked at, but never asked No.8 for his

residence status.

However, the situation changed significantly after 2000. Informant No.8 also said, “I feel that after the 9/11 terrorist attack, the attitude towards illegal overstay workers became severe.” Then, in 2003, he was told by the policeman who was a regular visitor to the bar, “you will be exposed, if you do not go back to your country soon,” and he decided to go home. He also believes that almost all overstay Bangladeshis left Japan after that period, except for the men who married Japanese women. Even informant No.13 who was staying in Japan lawfully felt that police examination increased after 2000 and the number of police visits increased around 2003.

4) Situation after 2003

The three informants (No.10, No.13, and No.14) who visited Japan before 2003 continued to stay after that as well. Among them, informant No.10 became an illegal overstay worker immediately after entering the country on a tourist visa in 1989. However, he acquired legal residence status by marrying a Japanese woman in 2002 and is now working in a company managed by his wife’s relative. Informant No.13 came from Bangladesh in 1992 and graduated from a technical school of information processing. He was then employed in an electronic component manufacturing company as a regular employee. Thus, No.13 worked legally for seventeen years. Informant No.14 visited Japan in 1994 and started working immediately with a legal status, after graduating from a University in Japan. He was working in a domestic company at the time of research.

In other words, in 2003, each of the three informants had a legal status of residence and were working in Japan.

Among all informants, No.15 visited Japan at a later stage. His first visit was in 2008. He was employed by a Japanese company as an engineer, immediately after graduating from an engineering university in Bangladesh, and thus had a legal work status when he first came to Japan. After working in the company, he switched jobs twice and found work as a regular employee in Japan within a month of unemployment in each case.

Informant No.15 was employed as a specialist from the start of his career in Japan. In that context, he may be an anomaly among the research informants. However, if a certain number of people visit Japan from Bangladesh as professionals, it may be a sign of a new type of international labor immigration.

4. Findings and Issues

Despite the insufficient number of informants, it is fortunate that their statements covered a span of more than 30 years, from 1984 to the present, without any research blanks. From their statements, some findings and issues for future research were inferred.

As stated above, a majority of illegal overstay workers returned, or were forcibly deported, to Bangladesh until the early 2000s. The informants, who continued to stay in Japan after 2004

or arrived later, had legal residence status and were working. The legal workers steadily rose in their position as workers or professionals from when they first arrived in Japan.

These findings suggest the possibility of Bangladeshi workers in Japan no longer being people mainly engaged in manual labor and earning low wages. However, in order to support the suggestion, it is necessary to hold more research data on Bangladeshi workers who have worked or are working in Japan.

Notes

- 1) In recent research on Bangladeshi rural immigrants in Japan, it is maintained that households that could afford money for immigration of family members to places overseas were not of poor economic status (Yamamoto & Araki, 2009, p.90).
- 2) According to the NIRA report, in the early 1990s, Bangladeshi workers' average wages were only about 44% of that of the Japanese workers engaged in the same kind of job (NIRA, 1993, p.44). Nevertheless, the informants of our research asserted that they have not experienced wage discrimination. This inconsistency must be cleared in future research.
- 3) According to Shimohira, Bangladeshi workers in Japan tend to take on more profitable jobs after repeated job changes during an economic boom (Shimohira, 1999, p.250).

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