

ECONOMIC EXCHANGE AND ITS CONSTRAINTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY BETWEEN MALAYSIA AND BANGLADESH

M Shahidul Islam Khondaker*
Azharudin Md Dali**
Universiti Malaya, MALAYSIA

Abstract

This study examines the economic exchange and its constraints between Malaysia and Bangladesh, specifically during the late 20th century. We are arguing that this issue is rarely addressed in the literature though in the relationship of these two countries, presenting the pros and cons of economic transactions are significant to strengthen the future linkages. Alongside the economic cooperation, the major characteristics of this reciprocal trade at that time were the economic imbalances and deficits between these two countries, where the Bangladeshi workers' migration to Malaysia and reciprocal trading products were considered. Such bilateral economic linkages also facilitated the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The research applies a historiographic approach as a study method. It consults some primary and secondary data and information, including government reports, files and documents, agreements, newspapers, books and articles. The study result showed the factual depiction of the reciprocal relationships between Malaysia and Bangladesh and their limitations in terms of the exchange of material goods, industry and worker migration. The findings of this study would fill the existing literature vacuum that can be consulted for further research.

Keywords: Malaysia, Bangladesh, Economic Relations, Trade Imbalance, Bilateral Relations

Introduction

The economic reciprocation between Malaysia and Bangladesh, the two Southeast and South Asian countries respectively, became remarkable during the late 20th century. At that time Malaysia was excelling in its economic development through adopting new policies. In this connection, Bangladesh was considered one of the potential countries by Malaysia to operate businesses along with the developing and Muslim countries in the globe. These two nations have been maintaining historical relationships since early times and were connected to the relations between ancient Southeast Asia and Bengal¹ in the economic and socio-cultural arena² and initiated new relationships after Bangladesh became independent in 1971.³ More specifically, during the late 20th century, the Ministers and Prime Minister of Malaysia visited Bangladesh several times and signed bilateral treaties over various sectors of potential that would benefit Malaysia in economic blooming. Similarly, different high officials from Bangladesh visited Malaysia and created an economic bond. As a result, the entrepreneurs from Malaysia's public and private sectors have invested in Bangladesh, and started business and trading on a wider scale especially from 1981 to 2003, during the reign of Tun Mahathir. This time, both nations were linked in direct and indirect economic cooperation. In the genesis of reciprocal cooperation, Bangladesh got technical assistance in the agriculture sector immediately after its independence, and Malaysia got educational support for its students studying in Bangladesh. The support from Malaysia in the agriculture sector was an economic cooperation that was badly needed for Bangladesh as it was a newly formed state.⁴ Gradually, they opened many new spheres of interaction through professional assistance,

labour migration, educational exchange, and the Tablighi missionary movement alongside others. Among them, the labour migration to Malaysia from Bangladesh was a vital economic issue that contributed to and was instrumental to both country's economic development. The economic relationships between these two countries were established, basically, based on the socio-cultural ties that were instrumental in the bilateral or multilateral relationships in the last two decades of the 20th century when Tun Mahathir Mohamed served Malaysia as the fourth head of the government with Malaysia's foreign policy equated to Tun Mahathir Mohamad's persona.⁵

Though this article analyses the economic ties and limitations between these two countries, specifically of the late 20th century, a brief historical background helps understand the basis of the two countries' relationships. From this viewpoint, the relationships between the Malay Peninsula and Bengal can be traced from the ancient period when Malay territory was known as 'Golden Khersonese' or the Peninsula of Gold to the availability of abundant resources⁶ and Bengal comprised several townships (Janapada)⁷ that had economic and socio-cultural uniqueness.⁸ Malaysia's prehistoric culture was revealed dated 74,000 years back⁹ and in early relationships Indian culture was the cornerstone that paved the pre-modern and pre-colonial society of Malaya¹⁰ where the economic linkages were active. Through maritime trade activities, Indian products came to the Malay Archipelago through the Bay of Bengal in the 5th century BCE.¹¹ Kedah, the Malay Peninsula port city, was influenced by Bengal's traders who travelled from the Tamralipti port of Bengal,¹² which proves the ancient Bengal's manipulation to Kedah¹³ in economic linkages. Socio-economic relationships have continued with the newly established Malay state Melaka since the fourteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the British EIC in Bengal backed and facilitated the British power in the Malay Peninsula to influence and control its administration and economy by establishing a bilateral trade relationship between the Malay world and British Bengal.¹⁴

Since Malaysia became an independent state in 1957, as a new state with a Muslim majority, Bangladesh has been a priority in Malaysia's foreign policy.¹⁵ It is necessary to mention that in 1204, Bengal came under Muslim rule with the invasion of Bakhtiar Khilzi, which virtually established the Delhi-based Sultani and Mughal rule in Bengal.¹⁶ Bengal had a socio-economic relationship with the ancient Kedah.¹⁷ Indian Emperor Ashok sent three of his royal ambassadors to Kedah to preach the ideas of the Buddhist religion in the fourth century BCE.¹⁸ These relationships show the economic and cultural contact of Bengal with the ancient Malay world. In 1757, the British East India Company captured Bengal by victory in the Battle of Palashi. It ruled Bengal for around 200 years that is up to 1947, when British power granted independence in a segregated manner by dividing the Indian territory into India and Pakistan. Bangladesh was part of Pakistan as East Pakistan at that time, which emerged as an independent country through a 9-month-long bloody battle with West Pakistan in 1971.¹⁹ The most vital sign of warm bilateral relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh was Malaysia's recognition of Bangladesh as an independent nation, which officially happened on February 25, 1972.²⁰

The Malaysian political party's concern about Bangladesh can be traced from the parliamentary discussion over various issues related to building a relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh, Bangladesh's relation with Pakistan and others. In response to the question of several members of Parliament (MPs), Malaysia's foreign and Prime Minister informed parliament regarding offering assistance extended to Bangladesh's economy, education and training initiatives.²¹ Prime Minister also stated about the establishment of a high commission in Dhaka and sending commissioner²² and Malaysia's position on Bangladesh-Pakistan issues and relations.²³ 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.²⁴ The visit of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Malaysia on October 24 1973²⁵ and His Majesty King Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah to Bangladesh in December 1974 signified the two nation's relationships a lot.²⁶ Malaysia co-sponsored the resolution at the latest General Assembly session of the United Nations to Bangladesh's admission to this premier global body. Both countries agreed to do the cultural exchange and educational and technical assistance by sponsoring scholarships and training programs bilaterally for the students and professionals in both countries and vice-versa.²⁷

In April 1978, a cultural cooperation agreement was signed that encouraged bilateral cooperation in the education, science, literature, culture, and sports sectors²⁸, and was signed an Economic and Technical Cooperation agreement on April 11, 1979. They recognised the areas of relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh by denoting the historical, cultural and religious ties and similar views pertaining to the world situation.²⁹ Likewise, the relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh also extended to the field of aviation service. Both countries connected through passenger flight operations from the early period of the relationship. In this connection, an Air Services Agreement was signed in July 1978 in a foreign minister-level meeting held in Dhaka that determined the airports using permission issues and frequency of flight operation from both sides. This agreement eased the travelling of the peoples of concerned nations. In the latter days, over the aviation service, several other agreements and memorandum of understanding were penned between these two countries. Such a collective bilateral promptness created and nurtured the economic relationship among them. Hence, Malaysia and Bangladesh were tied up in economic relationships through maritime trade connections since the early period and it got huge significance after establishing new relationships specifically after the mid-20th century between two new states, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

This study applies the historiographical approach and literature-based qualitative and quantitative research as methodology. It uses historical data and information gathered by consulting primary and secondary sources. 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. As the secondary sources, published books, journal articles, newspapers and relevant internet sources have provided relevant information. The study's significance is that it would outline new collective features of the significant economic issues that worked behind establishing a relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh, especially from 1981 to 2003 and fulfil the existing literature gap in this field. The findings will also be compatible with further studies of bilateral and international relations issues between nations. Thus, a few critical issues are the focus of this article and answer to the questions; firstly, the genesis of reciprocal trade, investment and business; secondly, the economic impact of the labour migration during the late 20th century have been discussed in the subsequent sections. Thirdly, the limitations and flaws in bilateral trade and worker migration issues have also been analysed, followed by concluding comments in the bottom lines.

Literature Review

The literature review provides a comprehensive picture of previous works on a particular area of study and by consulting them could determine the necessity of further research, while

write-ups on the economic aspects interplayed between Malaysia and Bangladesh are inadequate and, even any specific aspects of economic reciprocation are unavailable. For example, there have been no complete books or articles on bilateral trade and commerce. Moreover, despite the migrant worker's issue being a contributory one an insufficient volume of full pledge literature is available rather than some occasional and annual reports. The "*Migration and Integration in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia*," edited by Juliet Pietsch and Marshall Clark included a section written by Amarjit Kaur³⁰ that dealt with the issues of labour migration in Malaysia. Besides, it occasionally discussed the worker's migration from Bangladesh. It provides a specific idea on a few particular aspects while necessary for having a general impression of Malaysian labour markets and its relevant matters.

The book "*International Migration in Southeast Asia: Continuities and Discontinuities*" edited by Kwen Fee Lian, Md Mizanur Rahman, and Yabit bin Alas dealt with the international migration issues related to Southeast Asia that also discussed diverse aspects that directly impacted Malaysia alongside other Southeast Asian countries. In its different sections, Bangladesh's aspects also got room to be discussed occasionally rather than having a comprehensive discussion. Most importantly, the section "Migration and Employment: A Study of Bangladeshi Male Migrant Workers in Malaysia" written by Mst. Rayhena Sarker³¹ offers insight into the key force of the labourers who migrated to Malaysia from Bangladesh.

The "*Review of Labour Migration Policy in Malaysia*" is written by Benjamin Harkins.³² This volume analysed and discussed the Malaysian labour and migrant workers in detail offering a valuable picture of the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia but not a complete one, particularly on the Bangladeshi labourers. The write-up like "*Malaysia: An Overview of the Legal Framework of Foreign Direct Investment*" offers an overall picture of the investment happening in Malaysia from the outside world rather than economic issues and aspects between Malaysia and Bangladesh or the Malaysian investment in Bangladesh. This book was written by Arumugam Rajenthiran³³ and analysed and discussed the regulations of investments in Malaysia from foreign countries but does not have any linkage with the issues related to Bangladesh.

There have been some articles that provide authentic information about the labourer migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia. As the worker's issues are directly related to the country's economic development, those are significant in having a picture of migration and the economy. Among them, the "*Journal of Foreign Affairs Malaysia*,"³⁴ is a significant one. It was published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia and is still published regularly. Each volume of this journal is authentic to have the contemporary and current issues happening between Malaysia and any other country of the world. Significantly, it offers labour migration issues and economic agreements and initiatives between Bangladesh and Malaysia. As a result, consulting the issues published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia is a must but, it provides a very concise summarised narrative of the bilateral issues.

Some other articles like "Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Malaysia's Construction Sector," by Abdul Rashid Abdul-Aziz,³⁵ "Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Malaysia: Their Socio-Cultural Background and Work-Adaptability" by A. H. M. Karim, N. Mohamad Diah, S. Mustari, M. Sarker, and S Islam,³⁶ "Dynamics of remittance practices and development: Bangladeshi overseas migrants," by A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah³⁷ and "An Arithmetic analysis of Bangladeshi Sending Migrants Stock and Remittance Per Capita in Malaysia" by Kazi Abdul

Mannan and Khandaker Mursheda Farhana³⁸ are some value worthy articles analysed diverse aspects including migration regulations, costs involved, remunerations, living condition of the workers in Malaysia, administrative irregularities and bilateral relationships.

Moreover, the PhD thesis of Rupananda Roy³⁹ entitled “Political Economy of Labour Migration from Bangladesh: Power, Politics and Contestation” and the Master’s dissertation of Masud Rana⁴⁰ entitled “Malaysia-Bangladesh Economic Relation: 1971-2010” also dealt with different aspects of bilateral economy and worker’s migration.

However, the literature discussed above and referred to in the analysis section did encompass the whole picture of economic reciprocation. The trade and commerce materialised between these two countries and the imbalance of export-import activities of late twentieth century did not pictured appropriately. Moreover, the other economic dimension was the worker’s migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia during that period. It had and has potential for both states which faced huge challenges and did not address properly all the time. The existing literature is not capable of explicit all the dimensions and dynamics in a single study. From this point of view, this paper addresses the issues through a framework analysis of qualitative and quantitative data and information.

Analysis and Result

Commencement of Bilateral Trade and Investment

In 1972 the formal bilateral relationship commenced when Malaysia was a matured independent state for around 15 years, and Bangladesh was the newly formed nation-state.⁴¹ This time, the first Bangladesh government delegate’s visit to Malaysia. Malaysia assured supporting Bangladesh's admission into the United Nations and its other agencies. Malaysia expressed its intention to send two rubber experts and technical assistance for rice and jute plantations. Malaysia’s 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.⁴² During the 1980s, Malaysia was going to be an emerging economic country that translated into reality in the latter decades. This time, Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamed visited Bangladesh⁴³ and stated in a program in Bangladesh in 1983 that Malaysia is in the process of rapid development of the economy by gearing up the country’s agriculture from subsistence and production of raw materials for industry-based economic progression.⁴⁴ Now, Malaysia is one of the leading investing countries in Bangladesh, among Southeast Asian nations. It still prevailed, and the two nations' bilateral diplomatic relationship is going smoothly. In the last few decades, the Bangladesh government has also been taking new initiatives in the economic arena by establishing special economic zones across the country that open new investment opportunities for foreign investment where Malaysia can accelerate its investment volume⁴⁵ for the continuation of the exports of manufacturing goods in a growing volume that was 9.1 percent in 2018, which made the larger share of total exports at 83.7 percent.⁴⁶

A steady trend is noticeable in the passage of the economic growth of Bangladesh since its independence, though the past decade has been going better than the previous three decades. The economy's chronological progression shows that, on average, the 1980s country’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth was four percent enhanced to five percent in the 1990s, followed by a positive increment of six percent in the 2000s.⁴⁷ Over time, Bangladesh has shifted from a foreign aid-dependent economy to a trade-oriented economy, where the crucial role of the import and export GDP increased considerably over the years.

For example, the country's readymade garments sector has been making a considerable contribution to growing the country's gross economy by generating vast employment.⁴⁸ Bangladesh also exports this item to Malaysia as its significant foreign currency-earning product.

Figure 1: Malaysian Prime Minister and Bangladesh President in Bilateral Meeting in 1985.



Source: Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Visit by Bangladesh President, *Journal of Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, Vol.18, No.4, p.116.

Economic Reciprocation Complying the Global Regulations

The national and international regulations over trade and investment impacted the reciprocal business volume. In many cases, bilateral diplomatic relations shape the impact of domestic and international laws and institutions related to any specific field. For Malaysia and Bangladesh, such regulations and regulating bodies worked immensely behind the policy-making and development of trade and investment sectors. Malaysia formally entered industrialisation from its colonial agrarian regime of the economy in 1957 when it achieved independence. The most purposive and targeted measure in terms country's economic development Malaysia took in 1991 was Vision 2020. This step of Mahathir's government was not only for achieving economic development but also targeted to amplify the quality of the people's lives in political, social, spiritual, psychological and cultural spheres. Concerning this, Malaysia's pursued economic model adopted Free Trade Zones (FTZs) and Economic Development Corridors (EDCs) schemes⁴⁹ that have made today's Malaysia. The government of Malaysia started economic liberalisation in the mid-1980s, though Malaysian companies had been invested in foreign countries during the 1970s. In the 1990s, the Outward Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI) significantly changed Malaysia's economy, followed by the introduction of the ASEAN free-trade Area (AFTA) in 1992.⁵⁰ The Tun Mahathir-led government wanted the Malaysian people's active participation in industrialisation and introduced the National Economic Plan (NEP) by emphasising privatisation in enterprising. Unfortunately, economic up-grading faced a challenge because of the worldwide economic recession in mid-1985, and this situation was overcome by adopting the industrial master plan

of the Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia (HICOM). In the subsequent decade, Malaysia also managed the Asian economic crisis in 1997, resulting in the drop in the foreign currency rate that the Mahathir administration handled efficiently and returned to its ordinary course in 1998 through economic colonisation, cronyism and new collaboration.⁵¹

During the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia was one of the countries of newly emerging economies in Southeast Asia and the Far East. The secret to Malaysia's success was mainly the people of the country's enhanced export volume, political stability, and investment. In terms of the economic development of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir explored and applied his ideas of east look policy, privatisation of the government sector's industries, establishing economic planning unit (EPU) in bureaucracy, heavy industry policy, national development policy (NDP) and the thought of multimedia super corridor (MSC) that, literally made Malaysia economically sound and developed even within the world economic crisis of the mid-1980s and Asian financial crisis in 1997.⁵² Moreover, Malaysia has been a member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade GATT and WTO since 1957 and 1995, respectively and joined the developing country defensive position of the Group of 15 (G15) and the like-minded group (LMG) led by India, Pakistan, and Egypt.⁵³ In terms of tariff facilitation, Malaysia maintained multilateral relationships. She was the founding member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA). After 1999, she entered the free trade agreement (FTA) world and signed this kind of treaty with several countries.⁵⁴ Since the 1990s, Malaysia's government has adopted policies for industrial development that supported the enhancement of foreign direct investment in the capital-intensive and high technology industries. In line with that, the Malaysian government initiated the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) scheme in 1996 and enacted the Companies Commission Act 2001.⁵⁵

On November 2021 the United Nations General Assembly recommended Bangladesh for graduation out of LDCs, the Least Developed Countries,⁵⁶ as it fulfilled the three criteria for graduation from the LDCs, in line with the multilateral relationships and international institutional consultation. She has been maintaining international appellation in the field of trade and investment. Bangladesh has been a member of the world trade organisation (WTO) and getting aid for trade support. The period 1981 to 2003, it signed several regional and preferential agreements, including the South Asia Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). She is the member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Developing-8 (D-8), and others, alongside maintaining bilateral agreements with around 49 countries.⁵⁷ After independence, the new government of Bangladesh formed the Planning Commission for economic reconstruction, led by its first President, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A newly established planning commission formulated the country's economic policy and coordinated the national rehabilitation and development as the leading government institution. The commission adopted the first five-year plan for July 1973 to June 1978 with the objective of poverty reduction and economic development, and similar economic development plans taken by the subsequent governments literally pulled up on the track of gradual progress of the country.⁵⁸

The subsequent governments revised the government's new investment policy of 1974 to attract private and foreign investment. Government's positive attitude towards foreign investment was expressed in the Foreign Private Investment (Promotion and Protection) Act of 1980, and in 1982 President of the Council of Ministers Hussain Mohammed Ershad

introduced a new industrial policy. It encouraged the privatisation and denationalisation of public organisations.⁵⁹ In the early days after becoming an independent country, Bangladesh established bilateral investment treaties with a few European states like Belgium, Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), France, Romania, Turkey, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and the United States.⁶⁰ The trade policy was one of the most significant initiatives in Bangladesh's economic development progression among the policy reformation. From 1972 to 1980, the government intended to develop an inward-looking economy. From 1981 to 1990, Bangladesh wanted to make a moderate liberalisation of trade, whereas, since 1991, it has been a rapid liberalisation regime for Bangladesh's trade policy reformation. The policy reformation included import and export policies that transformed Bangladesh from a closed economy to a more open economy country. The early instrument was the foreign exchange allocation system (FEA) and the import policy orders (IPOs). In 1984, the government introduced the import licensing system called the letter of credit (LC) to permit the import of items and in 1986 outlined the 'positive list' with items that could be imported. During the 1990s the government rationalised tariff rates that decreased the average nominal rates of protection for all tradable products by which the number of tariff rates slashed from eight in 1993 to five in 2003.⁶¹

Bangladesh has also implemented several export-oriented policy reforms since 1984. Alongside others, the readymade garments sector benefited mainly from that policy reformation. Export Performance Benefit (XPB) was introduced in 1986 to offer exporters an added benefit by allowing them to cash the export earnings in US\$ in the secondary exchange market. In 1978, the Special Bonded Warehouse Scheme system and in 1983, the Duty Drawback System (DDS) was introduced in the Readymade Garments industry to exempt exporters from import taxes duty, followed by the Back-to-Back Letter of Credit System of 1987. Besides, Bangladesh's government took many other policies like the Cash Compensatory Scheme in 1986, the Export Credit Guarantee Scheme in 1978 and the Institutional Development for Export Promotion in 1977. Moreover, the industrial policy was reformed several times in 1991, 1992 and 1999, and in 1980 introduced Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority Act., the 1994 Companies Act., and the 2001 Telecommunications Act, in line with the country's FDI policy. Additionally, the government's private investment, agricultural policy, social protection programmes, human capital development, labour migration and remittances, and microfinance schemes during the 1980s, 1990s and early years of the current century geared up the trade and investment situation of the country.⁶²

Following the guidelines suggested by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), Bangladesh tried to stabilize the imbalance in the country's macro economy during the 1980s. For that, the government did policy reformation in the sectors of trade, monetary and fiscal and industry, privatising the public enterprises and promoting foreign direct investment (FDI). This initiative directed the decision-makers towards the new large-scale program related to trade liberalisation in the 1990s that broadened the country's trade arena through the measures taken by the subsequent governments.⁶³ In terms of the institutional framework, Bangladesh established the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA), the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA), and the Bangladesh High Tech Park Authority (BHTPA) to attract foreign investment. The BIDA is responsible for screening, reviewing and approving FDI in Bangladesh, except for FDI in Economic Zones.⁶⁴ For the sake of the country's economic development, the government of Tun Mahathir has taken multiple measures with the developing countries along with the east look policy during the 1980s. In

this connection, Malaysia signed separate agreements with Bangladesh in the sector of trade and economy. Among others, avoidance of double taxation agreement, maritime transport agreement, investment promotion and protection are a few significant deals Malaysia signed with Bangladesh that aided in making the economic relation with Bangladesh consolidated. An agreement was signed on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion concerning taxes on income between the government of Malaysia and Bangladesh in 1983. The area of the imposition of taxes in both countries on incomes is whatever the way taxpayers have charged. This agreement applied at the end of Bangladesh in the field of income tax and the instance of Malaysia income tax and excess profit tax, the additional income tax, timber profit tax, development tax and the income tax on petroleum. It also applies to the same type of taxes in Malaysia and Bangladesh.⁶⁵ This time the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamed and the President of the Council of Ministers of Bangladesh, Hussain Mohamed Ershad, welcomed this agreement. Both the premiers discussed the related issues in detail and with cordiality and complete understanding and expressed the utmost satisfaction at the positive development of the two countries.⁶⁶

During the visit of Tun Mahathir to Bangladesh in 1983, the Maritime Transport Agreement signed between Malaysia and Bangladesh helped to widen the cooperation in the sector of sea-born transportation and the carriage of freight to excel the trade investment through export-import movability. It was one of the most vital bilateral diplomatic steps to strengthen the mutual benefit between these two countries.⁶⁷ During the visit, the diplomatic initiative welcomed the Bangladesh President to make broader interaction and contact in the private sector to consolidate direct trade with Malaysia. Both the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the President of Bangladesh hailed the agreement for establishing the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia and the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Similarly, during the visit of the Bangladesh President to Malaysia in November 1985, agreements related to the Malaysian Investment and Trading Corporation (MITC) and the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) accelerated the trade and investment cooperation between Malaysia and Bangladesh. This time, Malaysia was greeted to import Jute carpets at a reduced tariff from Bangladesh to fulfil its public sector demand, while Bangladesh expressed an interest in purchasing palm oil from Malaysia.⁶⁸

Figure 2: Tun Mahathir Mohamed and Begum Khaleda Zia in a Program at Kuala Lumpur in 1994.



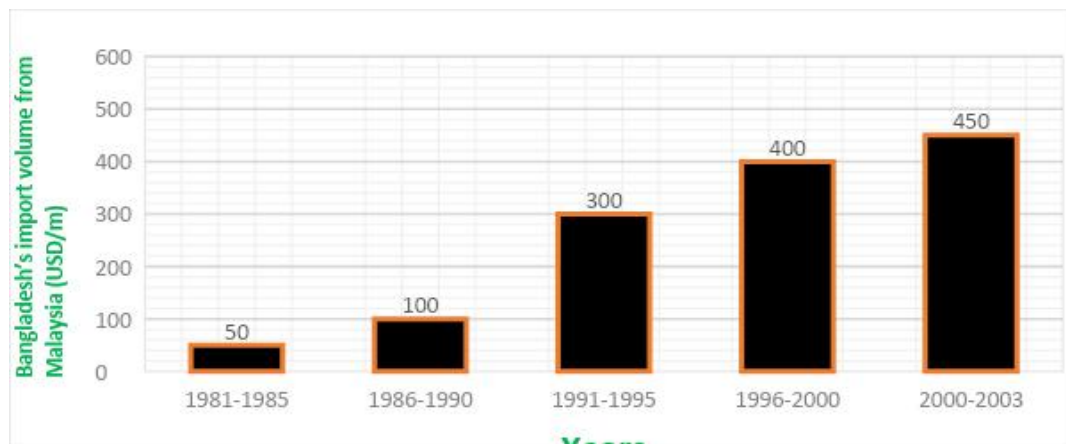
Source: Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Visit by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, *Journal of the Foreign Affairs of Malaysia*, 1994, Vol.27, No.4, p. 1

Economic Transaction and Imbalances

In terms of bilateral economic transactions, premiers of both states emphasised direct shipping services from and to Malaysia and Bangladesh to promote trade and economic cooperation. They also expressed interest in establishing joint venture financial institutions in agriculture and industry.⁶⁹ Malaysia opened its trade and commerce facilities to Bangladesh in its early relationship with Bangladesh. In 1985, Bangladesh President Hussain Mohamed Ershad visited Malaysia and observed various development projects in Malaysia that would open the excellent possibility in the field of trade and investment. This time, the Bangladesh President visited the Malaysian national car factory, a palm oil project, and a natural gas fertiliser project and met with the leaders of the Malaysian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.⁷⁰ As a part of bilateral trade development, an agreement was signed between the Malaysian automobile company Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional (Proton) and Bangladesh transport company Multimode Transport Consultant to promote the Malaysian car Proton Saga.⁷¹

The products and materials Bangladesh imports from Malaysia are significant, including the main items of Mineral fuels, oils, Animal and vegetable fats and oils, cotton, machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers, plastics, aluminium, iron and steel, organic chemicals, electrical, electronic equipment, rubbers, salt, sulphur, stone, plaster, lime and cement, staple fibres, dairy products, eggs, honey, edible, products, paper and paperboard, articles of pulp, paper and board. In addition, Bangladesh imported animal fodder, optical, technical, and medical apparatus, inorganic chemicals, precious metal compounds, isotopes, edible fruits, nuts, peel of citrus fruit, melons, wood and articles of wood, wood charcoal, soaps, lubricants, waxes, candles, modelling pastes, Tanning, dyeing extracts, tannins, derivatives, pigments, Copper, Zinc, Albuminoids, modified starches, glues, enzymes and many others.⁷²

Figure 3: Bangladesh's import volume from Malaysia (USD/m).



Source: Data collected from Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com>, Assessed on 03 March 2020.

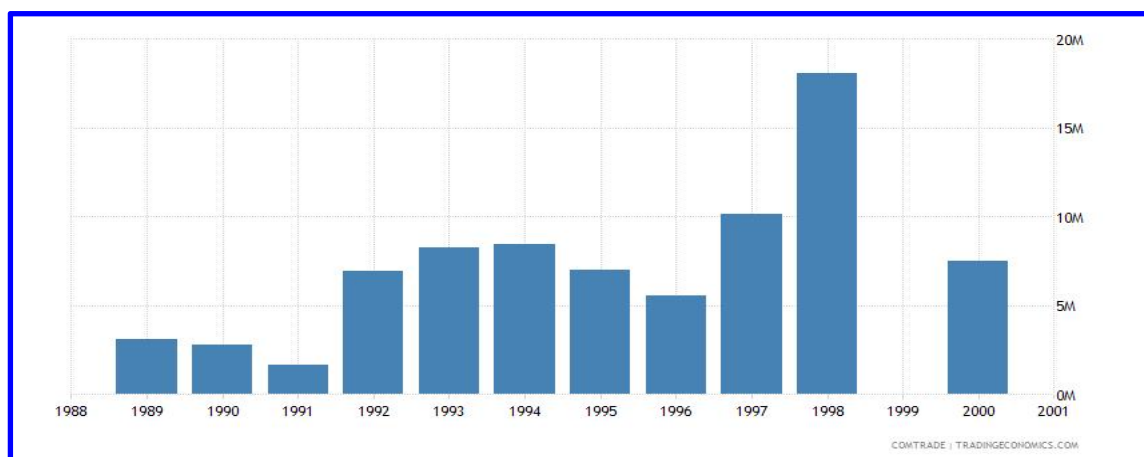
Relations with overseas countries have not always brought success for Bangladesh because of a few infrastructural backwardness. In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), Bangladesh had flaws due to poor infrastructure and the high cost of doing business, which was responsible for the economy's low growth. To overcome this situation, Bangladesh needed to reform and formulate new policies related to trade and investment, including industrial policy, fiscal policy, exchange rate policy, monetary policy, and foreign direct

investment policy that excelled its gross economy.⁷³ Perhaps, gradually, such initiatives made possible the increment of the export sector of the country. A study shows that in 1973 the total volume of Bangladesh's exports was USD 778 million, which accelerated to USD 3984 million in 1995 and in 2011, it was USD 20,432 million. During the 1990s it was highest and in 1995 export volume grew at 31 percent.⁷⁴ Since then, Bangladesh has materialised the increase in foreign investment by taking various steps like adopting new technology and processes, amplifying managerial skills and increasing international connection and access to production.⁷⁵

The figure (Fig 3) shows the steady increase of Bangladesh's import volume from Malaysia from the late 1980s to the early years of the current century, with a few flaws. The economic growth of Bangladesh was evident during the 1990s. A considerable volume of physical capital accumulation and labour force exporting through reforming the macroeconomic management and reformation of trade policy helped to the booming of the country's garments sector. Alongside exporting frozen foods in European markets, liberalisation of the import and financial sector, investment in human skill development, and social protection schemes happened through the bilateral diplomatic initiation and domestic entrepreneurship.⁷⁶ The relations of Bangladesh with other nations over the economy mainly depended on the country's conventional export items. Among the insufficient capacity to comply with the standard, Bangladesh is usually used to export readymade garments, leather, Jute, Shrimp, and tea worldwide.⁷⁷ In the current trade situation, the items Bangladesh exports to Malaysia are readymade garments, potatoes, vegetables, fruit juice, fish and crustaceans, footwear, tea and spices, pharmaceuticals, plastic products, and so on⁷⁸ that Bangladesh wants to expand widely by getting the opportunity of the free trade agreement.

The export volume of Bangladesh to Malaysia especially during the late 20th century was significantly less compared to Malaysia, indicating a clear deficit in the volume of foreign trade. The following historical chart shows in 1989 Bangladesh exported a volume of products and materials of just around USD 3 million. The trend of exports was steady during the 1990s with the exception of 1998 with about USD 18 million which was the highest and most significant achieved in a decade. It was around USD 8 million with a complete interval in 1999.

Figure 4: Products and materials exported from Bangladesh to Malaysia (USD/m)



Source: Data collected from Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com> Assessed on 03 March 2020.

Amongst this huge gap in reciprocal trade, Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Mahathir Mohamad⁷⁹ stated that Malaysia and Bangladesh consciously and systematically established cooperation on the trade and economic front and hoped to boost economic ties between the two Muslim nations.⁸⁰ He also expressed his worry about the low volume of trade between the two countries by presenting the economic data for two-way trade between 1991 and 1992, which was USD 56.8 million for the former year and USD 51.0 million for the first nine months of subsequent year. This time, the Malaysian Prime Minister emphasised building economic relations with the South rather than dependency on the North. In terms of relations with Bangladesh, he reiterated that Malaysia and Bangladesh are confident with their bilateral joint venture ties of industrial policy and investment policy derived from Bangladesh and Malaysia's side, respectively. It also hoped that the private sector links through the memorandum of understanding signed between the chambers of both countries would be consolidated in strengthening the economic and commercial ties.⁸¹

Malaysia entered into Investment Guarantee Agreements (IGAs), which aim to promote a conducive investment environment.⁸² A bilateral investment treaty signed between Malaysia and Bangladesh in October 1994 came into force in 1996. This agreement's objective was to expand and make the economy strong and cooperate in the industrial establishment of both countries by establishing a longstanding relationship. It also aimed to create a favourable environment for the entrepreneur's investment from one country to another. Economic prosperity by protecting and facilitating public and individual investment and establishing business in both states was its primary goal. This bilateral initiative wanted to ensure the promotion and protection of investments and confirm the repatriation of investment. This bilateral investment agreement kept the clause that determines and settles the dispute related to Malaysia and Bangladesh's investment.⁸³

In terms of trade and economic cooperation, Malaysia had been interested in assisting with capital and technological know-how to tap the full potential that could reduce the existing trade imbalance during the early 1990s between Malaysia and Bangladesh.⁸⁴ The Malaysian Prime Minister opined in the reception meeting for the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2000 in Kuala Lumpur that in the first five months of the last year of the 19th century, the bilateral trade volume is USD 263 million that is an increased registering than the previous years. He has expressed his happiness to see the joint venture partnership in the private sector and for Malaysia enlisted in the investment board of Bangladesh as the third-largest investor in Bangladesh with a total investment of USD 1.32 billion. Malaysia was also optimistic about Bangladesh's interest in an open market economy that can materialise through the private sector-led trade and industry and private sector-oriented growth and economic development.⁸⁵

Workers Migration and Economic Exchange

Malaysia and Bangladesh gradually opened many new spheres of interaction, particularly through manpower migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia alongside others. From the 1980s, the economic and social relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh principally were orbital to the labour migration aspect rather than the many other new aspects prioritised. It had a socio-economic domain and formal bilateral cooperation was established in 1986⁸⁶ through the commencement of legitimate worker's migration. This extension of the relationship brought realistic progression for both nations in terms of economic development mostly. 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.⁸⁷ From this point of view, both Malaysia and Bangladesh agreed over and signed various international conventions, agreements and protocols regarding bilateral labour migration as well as established many public and private institutions in line with those agreements.

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-1959, the Private Employment Agency Act-1981, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act-2007, and the Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act-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).⁸⁸ Some other regulations were the Employment Restriction Act of 1968, the Labour Accord-1985 and the Special Task Force on Foreign Labour.⁸⁹

Similarly, regarding transnational labour migration, Bangladesh-Malaysia diplomatic relations have been influenced mostly by various international agreements and conventions signed by Bangladesh. It also created several institutions in its public and private sectors to promote and monitor labour migrations. Among international conventions Bangladesh signed and ratified since independence were the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR-1972) and 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 20th 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, 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.⁹⁰ These laws, by-laws, acts, rules and regulations have positively or negatively been influencing Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia alongside established institutions and organizations.

Trend of Bangladeshi Diaspora in Malaysia

Workers who migrated from Bangladesh, engaged in diverse occupations like in agriculture, plantation, services, construction and manufacturing.⁹¹ 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 sector⁹² 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 1992.⁹³ Since 1984, Malaysia has collaborated with several states, including Bangladesh, over a reciprocal memorandum of understanding to restructure labour migration issues.⁹⁴ The diplomatic involvement in the arrangement about labour migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia happened in 1992 by signing the formal agreement.

Figure 5: Malaysia's Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamed welcomes Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Kuala Lumpur on her arrival in Malaysia in 2000.



Source: Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Official Visit of the Honourable Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, *Journal of Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, Vol. 33, p.15

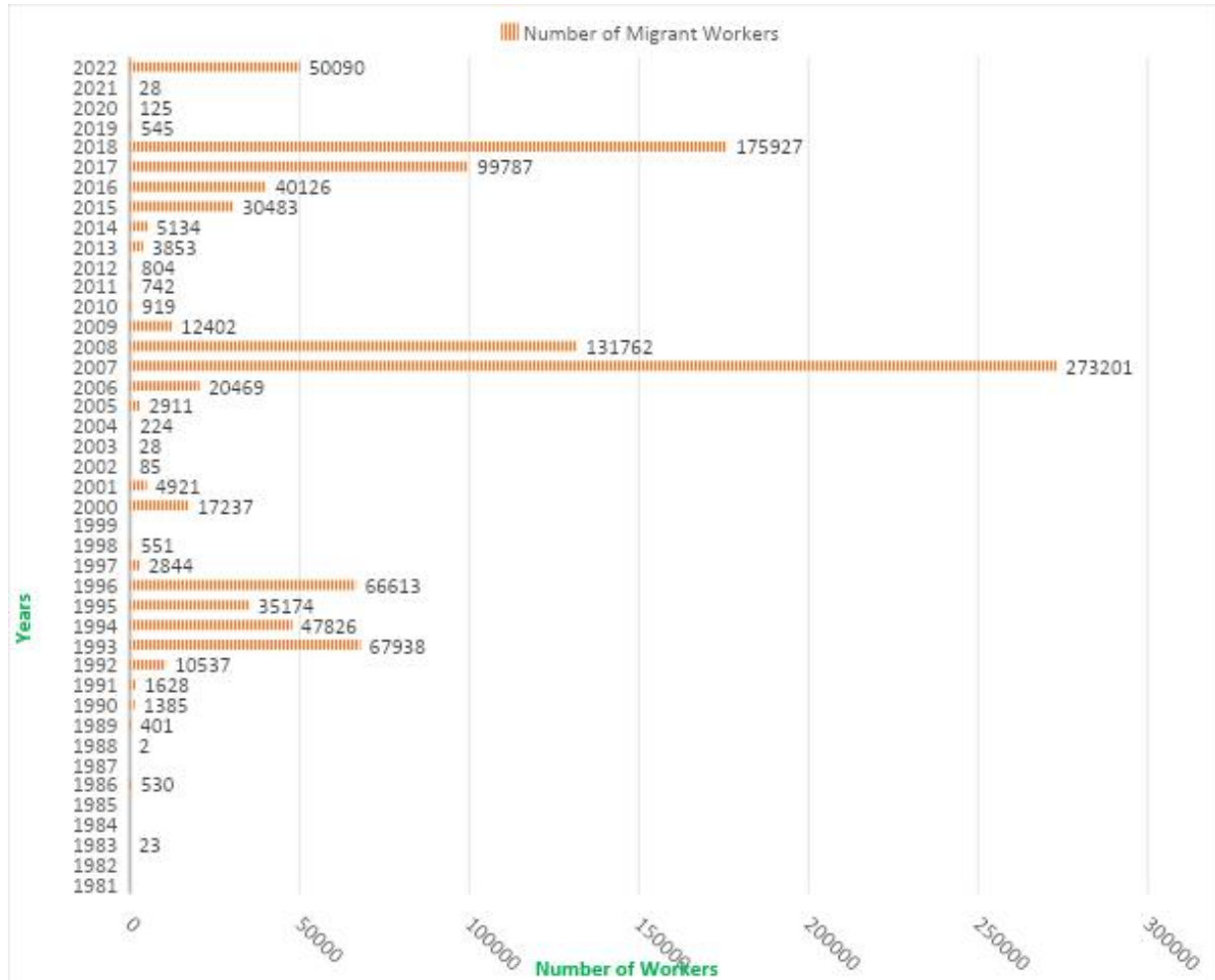
However, the first test basis migration happened in 1986 for the plantation project with 500 workers.⁹⁵ In this connection, the then Bangladesh Labour and Manpower Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuyan visited Malaysia and met with the Malaysian Human Resource Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek in Kuala Lumpur on September 22, 1992,⁹⁶ to discuss the related issues over the recruitment of workers. Afterwards, in 1994 another agreement was signed over worker's transfer, but the Asian Financial Crisis obstructed that program and was disrupted for several years.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸

Bangladesh's then President Hussain Mohammed Ershad in a programme in Kuala Lumpur in 1985 appreciated Mahathir Mohamed for the 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ Under this contract, from 1992 to 1994, around 130,000 people migrated to Malaysia as the workforce.¹⁰¹ For the continuation of labour migration flow, the second bilateral labour agreement concluded in 1994 by which it determined that Malaysia would import 50,000 labourers every year to deploy in their construction sector.¹⁰² After signing this agreement, from 1995 to 1997, around 102,000 people entered Malaysia which virtually not met the target formerly set in terms of the number of persons who would have been imported by Malaysia.

Regrettably, because of the financial crises in Asia, the migration of the labour force to Malaysia reduced massively and around 100,000 people were expatriated in 1997. In 2001,

Malaysia also terminated the previous bilateral agreement agreements signed over labour migration and declared a ban on the official migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia¹⁰³ possibly because of the discrepancies done by the agents and migrated labours.

Figure 5: Workers migration flow from Bangladesh to Malaysia during 1981-2022



Source: <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/> Assessed on 1 January 2023.

This restriction was upheld up to October 2003 when a bilateral MoU was signed over fresh employment of Bangladeshi workers. The ups and downs of the number of migrant workers entering Malaysia from Bangladesh from the earlier times to 2023 are clearly shown in the above chart (Fig 5) 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 a two-year interval, 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.

Worker's Migration and Economic Contribution

Workers' migration-oriented economic benefits for Malaysia and Bangladesh were reciprocal and significant. The rapid growth of heavy industries and policies regarding that in Malaysia demanded both semi-skilled and more professional and skilled workers.¹⁰⁴ A study shows this time the size of the annual labour force increase in Bangladesh during the 1980s was 3.46 percent¹⁰⁵ 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 to the country's remittance flow. Research conducted with 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸

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.¹⁰⁹ A Bangladesh Bank source has revealed the trend in the growth of remittance that shows since the start of the 1980s, it was with a regular boosting wherein 1981, the total remittance entered around US\$ 400 million¹¹⁰ 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 worker's force in Malaysia was US\$ 1044 million.¹¹¹ 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.

Constraints of the Economic Reciprocation and Migrant Workers

Relation with overseas countries has not always brought success for Bangladesh because of a few infrastructural backwardness. In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), Bangladesh had flaws due to poor infrastructure and the high cost of doing business, which was responsible for the economy's low growth. The export volume of Bangladesh to Malaysia especially during the late 20th century was significantly less compared to Malaysia indicating a clear deficit in the volume of foreign trade. Amongst this huge gap in reciprocal trade, Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Mahathir Mohamad stated that Malaysia and Bangladesh consciously and systematically established cooperation on the trade and economic front and hoped to boost economic ties between the two Muslim nations. He also expressed his worry about the low volume of trade between the two countries by presenting the economic data for two-way trade between 1991 and 1992, which was USD 56.8 million for the former year and USD 51.0 million for the first nine months of the subsequent year. It was evident that a steady increase of Bangladesh's import volume from Malaysia from the late 1980s to the early years of the current century, with a few flaws. Malaysia was the founding member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Free Trade

Agreement (AFTA). After 1999, she entered the free trade agreement (FTA) world and signed this kind of treaty with several countries¹¹² but Bangladesh was not able to get such economic benefit from Malaysia.

Irregularities in Worker's Migration constrained the economic benefit for both nations. In terms of hindrances and challenges, the workers faced constraints in migration expenses, remuneration, skills, industrial security, suitable residential places, cultural orientation etc. 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 38,000¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ Both in the origin and destination countries, the involvement of several public and private stakeholders, including sub-agents, passport issuing authorities, and medical centres, has been behind the increase in migration costs from Bangladesh to Malaysia. Thus, the migration cost in various periods from the 1980s to date has become 10-20 times higher than the one fixed by the authority.

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, they needed to spend around MYR (Malaysian Ringgit) 4.5 thousand (MYR) during the 1990s. Even they had to pay extra money to the BMET to get legal permission to fly.¹¹⁵ Regarding employment contracts of Bangladeshi migrant workers, several discrepancies, extortion, and deceptive activities often happen. An IMO study shows that 46 per cent of migrants reported that they did not receive the remuneration indicated in their contracts.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷ One of the frequently appearing scenes observed in terms of Bangladeshi workers was that they are 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.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ In terms of work hazards, in the first half of the 1990s, around 2, 500 Bangladesh workers lost their lives in Malaysia while performing their duty in several industries. Such incidents and accidents have been checked by the government's regulatory by-laws, like the Occupational Safety and Health Act enacted in 1994.

Illegal Manpower Migration became a burning issue for Malaysia and Bangladesh. 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 had been a

problem for Malaysia since the 1970s. This illegal human movement happened, and job seekers mostly came from Indonesia. The 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.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ On illegal emigration, a considerable number of Bangladeshi people enter other countries through human trafficking and sometimes using other people's passports¹²² 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 camps¹²³ 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.¹²⁴

Discussion and Conclusion

The points analysed above show that the success and progression in reciprocal trade in economic materials, investment and migrant workers between Malaysia and Bangladesh during the late 20th century were contributory to country's advancement alongside a clear imbalance of business volume that was positive contributory benefits much for Malaysia than Bangladesh.

In terms of migrant workers, both states achieved financial blessings, embracing considerable flaws that affected both.

The trade and investment that is multifactorial in the current days and has tremendous diversity in terms of business diversity, investment volume, and the sectors Malaysia invests in Bangladesh. This trend is a continuation of trade and commerce initiated and maintained during the 1980s-1990s when Malaysia's government was doing painstaking work to progress the country's economic status. Nevertheless, the trade maintained with Bangladesh during the first regime of Tun Mahathir Mohamed as Prime Minister of Malaysia or the late 20th century was facing a severe imbalance that showed a massive deficit in the volume of exports of Bangladesh and on the other hand, the import volume was unnaturally high.

From this imbalance in trade, Malaysia benefited immensely because of the production of necessary items that Bangladesh imported and utilised in the country's development projects and used and consumed daily. Malaysia made it possible to export a range of trading items to Bangladesh, including almost all necessary items people usually use in their everyday lives. Malaysian diplomacy also successfully established favourable relations with Bangladesh, which helped increase its business volume.

On the contrary, in domestic production, Bangladesh failed to bring diversity and widen the necessity of the products. As a result, it could also not enhance the items that had demand in Malaysia, and Malaysian traders would have to import them from Bangladesh. Additionally, though the bilateral agreements signed between Malaysia and Bangladesh

opened new doors and widened the cooperation windows, Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts were not able to reach their optimal point. For example, it has still been struggling with a free trade agreement (FTA) that could broaden Bangladesh's opportunity to export many items to Malaysia during the 1990s when Malaysia started to sign this agreement with many countries.

In terms of migrant workers, though both countries enjoyed economic benefits, there were some serious drawbacks that sometimes created a negative impact on the diaspora relationships. For example, 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. Malaysian government implemented the provision of the Migration Act of 1959 by the Immigration Act of 2002 in respect of employing illegal migrants in any work by any organisation that applies with compelling penalty payment or prisoning or faces both punishments. 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.

The legal, peaceful and friendly manner of the diaspora has also been hindered because of the weakness in the administrative process in Bangladesh. For example, claiming extra money from the employees the concerned bodies and personnel made the migration process incredible and complex. In some cases, the diplomatic initiatives became unsuccessful in ensuring the issues related to salary and working hours created a sort of dissatisfaction within the migrant communities. In many cases, Bangladeshi migrant workers were deprived of their social dignity. Malaysian citizens sometimes considered them a low-profile class of people not interested in mixing with them. Getting appropriate accommodation was also an issue for them the places they were allocated to live by their employers were sometimes not healthy and hygienic. Sometimes the hazardous working environment created dissatisfaction within the labour force that migrated from Bangladesh to Malaysia.

Therefore, using the conventional relationship, both states renewed their relationship after Bangladesh became a free country in the late 20th century. They did it with bilateral economic cooperation embracing new trading, new investment and using migrant workers as driving forces that cemented hugely the relationships between Malaysia and Bangladesh and made the economic progression for both countries. Nevertheless, the late 20th century was a period both nations were forwarding together but the continuous smooth steps of Malaysia kept her well ahead of Bangladesh. That was the basic gap, limitation or constraint constant in relationships between these two South and Southeast Asian nations.

Acknowledgement

The paper is based on the first author's Master's thesis that was accomplished at the Department of History, the University of Malaya. Thus, the authors express gratitude to the teachers of the History Department at the University of Malaya for receiving support. The authors also acknowledge the help offered by the department providing special permission to enter university libraries to collect the sources and materials during the COVID-19 pandemic when access to libraries was restricted. This research did not receive financial support from any institution but rather their initiative.

Biodata

*M Shahidul Islam Khondaker (shahidul2112@gmail.com) (corresponding author) is a PhD Student at the History Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is also a Senior Lecturer at the General Education Department (GED), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

** Dr. Azharudin Md. Dali (azharud@um.edu.my) is a Senior Lecturer at the History Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Received: 21 January 2024

Reviewed: 16 April 2024

Accepted: 30 June 2024

Notes

¹ "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, 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-day 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 History of Ancient Bengal, 1971, p. 1–14 for more details). Usually, to understand the earliest period of Bangladesh, the phrase 'ancient Bengal' uses.

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