

Globalization, International Migration and the Need for Networking: The Bangladesh Perspective

by
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1.1 Introduction

The 20th Century ushered an era of mass communication, globalization and information technology (IT). Particularly remarkable is the IT that simplified communication system and reduced its cost dramatically. It has stirred the world by defying the distance and crossing the barriers of international borders. Despite its mass appeal it is surprising that only around 8% of the world population are using Internet facilities. Like telephone and other modes of communication here too one could observe a great divide between the developed and developing countries and the privileged and underprivileged classes. It is true that the art of estimating the number of Internet users throughout the world is not only complicated but also inexact one. Yet there are surveys around using all sorts of parameters. Here we will use an “educated guess” made by Nua Internet Surveys in November 2000, which is based on the observation of many published surveys over the last two years. It suggests that around the world there are 407.1 million Internet users and the share of the users is highly disproportionate among the region depending on its level of development. For example, users from Canada and USA account for more than 40% of the total users globally followed by Europe having 30% of the total users whilst users from Asia (without Japan and Taiwan) and Africa constitute only a fraction despite having the largest chunk of the world’s population. Even within the developed countries, where between a third and a half of the population that are using the benefits generated from IT are the privileged classes. The situation is the worst in the case of Bangladesh, one of the developing countries where only 30,000 or 0.02% of the total population have access to such IT facilities. It is encouraging that some NGOs in the country are now working to break class barrier in the spread of IT and bring it within the reach of the

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micro-credit users who constitute poorer segment of population. However no such move has been taken in favour of the country's emigrant labour who constitute the backbone of its economy. It is also argued that:

Remittances in Bangladesh had not only resolved the foreign exchange constraint and helped in improving the balance of payments in the country but under different government schemes it also ensured the imports of capital goods and raw materials for industrial development. It helped to increase its supply of savings and investment for capital formation and development. Migration of workers also helped in reducing the unemployment rate, which is one of the major problems of Bangladesh (Afsar et al. 2000).

Nonetheless the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) failed to safeguard these workers from harassment, exploitation and human rights abuses both in the process and after their temporary emigration. At the place of destination, they work longer hours and receive lower wages than stipulated in the contract. More frequently they are victims of human rights violation in terms of living and working condition and women in particular are subject to blatant gender discrimination (Afsar, 2000). It is interesting that Bangladesh along with India and Pakistan are the major labour exporting countries to the Middle East and yet they never attempted to come to an agreement despite sharing the same subdued position. Nor has it formed coalition/networks with any developed country to get necessary backing and for mobilizing active support for the ratification of Convention on the protection of rights of all migrant workers and members of their families. Its emigrant population is completely devoid of the free flow of information and access to simple information technology, which could have saved them from harassment, exploitation and loss of money. Due to growing interdependence among the different countries of the world, networking, lobbying and advocacy have become the most important tools for survival. With the break down of communist states and unhindered triumph of capitalism, networking among the nations emerged as the most effective and the only recourse to safeguard against absolute power, corruption and other forms of discrimination and injustice. While economic strength of a country is an important parameter in such collaboration, wisdom of the country's political leaders to forge alliances in the major decisive force in this regard. Thus for example the developed

countries exercise unanimous power to decide about race and fate of emigrants although often these countries are composed of migrants. They also enjoy almost absolute freedom to waste all major sources of energy, sale the most dangerous weapons to any developing countries of their choice and extravagant consumerism. By contrast the developing countries lag far behind in the race for sustainable development. Being obsessed with the internal power politics, they often neglect the greater interest of peace, harmony and ecological balance and over and above the dignity of human being.

1.2 Objectives and structure of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to develop an agenda for networking between Bangladesh and Sweden and such other like-minded country for optimum utilization of opportunities unleashed by globalization while safeguarding against its negative externalities. In essence the paper presents the context of Bangladesh and other labour importing countries as a prelude to explain the necessity of labour migration. It then highlights the situation of migrant labour in a nutshell to demonstrate multi-dimension of human right violations. Finally it argues in favour of coalition building and networking for the effective implementation of the Convention on protection of Migrant's Rights and spread of IT facilities.

1.3 Data Sources

The paper draws heavily from the author's empirical studies on international labour migration of Bangladeshi men and women. These studies were based on survey of the emigrant labour at UAE, one of the major country of destination followed by tracer survey of their families in rural Bangladesh. It is also based on a thorough review of secondary materials on globalization, labour emigration, human rights and spread of IT activities.

2.1 Contextual Analysis of Labour Immigration: The Bangladesh perspective

With its socio-economic and demographic trends, Bangladesh can be best described as a country in crossroads. Its population exceeded 130 million and cultivable land declined from 20.16 million acre to 17.78 million acres between 1983/84 and 1996 (BBS, 1986, 1999). Between 1974 and 1995/96, the population grew at the rate of around 2% per annum, whereas the growth of labour force was much higher, that is 3% per annum during the same period (BBS, 1994, 1996). With the onset of fertility transition, the growth of active age population is likely to be more rapid and this is already evidenced empirically (Afsar and Baker, 1999, Hossain et al. 1999). Although existing evidence suggests decline in the level of poverty in both rural and urban areas (Rahman et al. 1996, Hossain et al. 1999), yet the absolute size of the poverty stricken population is large by any standard. In the 1990s, GDP per capita was estimated to grow by 5%, whilst a 7/8% growth rate is often considered essential to have desirable impact on social development and poverty reduction (Mujeri, 2001). Bangladesh has a chronic history of trade deficit and currently workers' remittances meet more than two-thirds of the trade deficit (Afsar et al. 2000). "The major export item e.g. readymade garments which played the key role in past robust growth of the export sector has shown signs of tapering off in growth performance" (Mujeri, 2001). The import is likely to grow widening the trade deficit. Amidst such a fluid situation, workers' remittances have increased, consistently from US\$ 761 million to US\$ 1706 million between 1989/90 and 1998/99. Obviously it indicates importance of international migration by the Bangladeshi labour in generating remittances.

2.2 Importance of Labour Import: Perspective from Receiving Country

The six countries of the Middle East viz. that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates are linked geographically by the Persian Gulf along the Arabian Peninsula and politically through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are the major importers of the Asian labour. More than three-quarters of Bangladeshi labours

are migrating to these countries. Asian immigrants can be best described as "necessary evil" from the GCC point of view. This is because Asians contribute more than 80% of the total labour force for these nations and yet they are cheaper, less politically threatening and can be more effectively exploited through policies of deliberate discrimination than Arab migrants. In implementing labour migration policy, the Gulf States partly followed the Western policy of extracting labour from migrant without engaging them fully as human beings (Choucri 1978; El-Mallakh 1982; Ismail 1986; Nagi 1986b; Sell, 1988). However, laws and regulations governing migration, and labour entitlements in the GCC are much stricter and explicitly discriminatory than those prevailing in Europe or North America. Their labour market is segmented on account of class, race, ethnicity and gender, which permeate through both public and private sectors. Here the segmentation is between "privileged natives in government and the upper tiers of private enterprise and immigrants in the rest of the economy, including nearly all material production (done by foreign men)" (Messey et al. 1998).

2.3 Characteristics and Condition of the Bangladeshi Labour

Bangladeshi emigrant labours are predominantly youth and young adults. Women are younger than their men counterparts. These facts are consistent with risk-taking capacity of those groups and age-sex selectivity of migrants. A large majority of them are from average and poverty-stricken families who migrated with the help of other family members. Skill composition of the emigrant labour reveals that 60% of them migrated with pre-requisite skills and the remaining 40% are unskilled and/or semi-skilled labours. Women however are mostly absorbed in the manufacturing and personal services sectors and in the case of the former, their previous work experience at home puts a premium to their entry to international labour market. On an average they spent between US \$1000 – 2000 as visa fee and airfare to the Middle East.

Considering that the airfare is borne by the employees at destination which they later deduct from the salary of the migrants and that the official recruiting agencies charge around US \$250, one could clearly see the exploitation of emigrant labours. Please note that private recruiting agencies in collusion with employers at destination and some of the

personnel of the country's diplomatic mission exploit emigrant labours. Once the flood gate of exploitation is opened at the entry point it permeates through all levels such as wage fixation, working hours, salary cut, boarding and lodging and sickness entitlement. On an average they receive US \$50 -\$100 less than what is promised as monthly wage in their Contract prior to migration. RMG sector in particular is notorious for irregular payment schedule. Here the migrant labour work 12/14 hours and often do not enjoy any weekly holiday. They live with 6 to 10 boarders in boarding houses with per capita space of 8 to 15 square feet. In addition women workers are also subject to highly discriminatory wage, frequent salary cut, verbal abuse, flogging and restricted mobility. Bangladeshi emigrant women receive 44% of the wage received by their male counterparts in the same and other sectors. Existence estimates suggest that on a monthly basis they spent around 5% to 10% of their overseas income on postal and telecommunication purpose. Had they got access to free flow of information prior to migration and contact with the employers like the Arab migrants, they could have been saved from misery and undue exploitation.

3.1 The Need for Coalition Building and Networking

Human rights violation and exploitation of migrant workers are taking place despite of the adoption of the international Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all migrant workers and members of their families on December 18, 1990 by the General Assembly, which was signed by 117 members states in subsequent years. In the context of growing manifestations of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination and inhuman and degrading treatment against migrant workers in different parts of the world, the Convention urges countries of destination to review and adopt as appropriate, measures to prevent the excessive use of force. It also calls those countries to ensure that their police forces and competent migration authorities comply with the basic standard relating to the decent treatment of migrant workers and their families, inter alia through the organization of training courses on human rights. In an era of inter-connected world enforcing the Convention on Migrant Workers' rights is dependent on international cooperation, coordination and advocacy. Since Bangladesh is one of the labour sending

country it must regularly present reports on violation of human rights in UN Commission on Human Rights. Exposure of violation of rights of migrants is both necessary and often effective in getting remedies when it happens in reputed international forum.

3.2 Outlining a Blueprint for Coalition Building

Promoting the convention has several dimensions. As a first step, its legal standards need to be incorporated into national, state or provincial and local legislation. What is most important is to put this legislation into practice and monitoring that practice in regular intervals. In the context of the GCC States where UN agencies are often non-existent, it is important to build coalition and networking for implementation of clause 2 of the convention². At this stage it is important to build coalition with developed country such as Sweden for advocacy, awareness and spread of IT facilities. Coalition should be built with Academic Institutions and student body associations concerned with human rights, environment, development and equity issues. The following vehicles are proposed for building coalitions:

- _ An apex coalition or committee to consult on plan of action
- _ Advisory committee of important individual and groups to monitor and supervise activities of the apex coalition.

Effective coalition must be based on following activities:

- _ Public education and awareness
- _ Spread of IT
- _ Training of organizers and advocates
- _ Building institutional support
- _ Conducting advocacy or lobbying with government and international human rights organizations.

The major purpose of the coalition/networking is to establish monitoring process to identify violation of migrants' rights and pursue legal and other remedies. Obviously,

generation of data depends on the spread of IT, which in turn depends on infrastructure support from telecommunication networks and electricity. Although almost all districts (the top tier of the administrative unit) in Bangladesh are covered by telecommunication networks but it reaches to only 1.9% of the total households in the country. Similarly, so far only 40% of the villages are electrified covering 9% of the households. Under the situation a two-pronged networking is proposed with Sweden at macro and meso levels (Figure 3.1). At macro level there can be a bilateral agreement between the Government of Bangladesh and Sweden to promote investment by the Swedish company/investors on the energy and telecommunication sectors for the spread of IT facilities within the country. Collaboration with the Swedish government should be sought to establish a Cyber port in the South Asian region for free flow of information with regard to labour laws of the country of destination and for generating data base on the demand of labour, the supply situation and intensity, nature and frequency of human rights abuse. This will help establish institutional basis to monitoring process of the Convention on migrant workers rights. Data thus generated should contribute in the preparation of the national and regional reports to international forum and 'treaty bodies' and lobbying with international human rights organizations for seeking redress and compensation for the victims of human rights abuse from the employers.

At the meso level, collaboration can be established between institutions in Sweden such as SIDA and different universities such as Lund university and the academic institutions and a few selected government departments of Bangladesh such as Bureau of Employment, Manpower and Training (BMET) and Postal department for training of organizers and advocates and building institutional support. Thus BMET, which was established by the government to organize, monitor and facilitate overseas migration should be equipped with Internet services and training facilities so that it can impart training as to how to use Internet services to prospective migrants and their families. It can also access information on job market from the Cyber port and would be in a better position to be appraised of the conditions and entitlements associated with each job. Hence, it can perform its monitoring role over private recruiting agencies more

² As mentioned before it urges the countries of destination to review and adopt, as appropriate measures to

effectively. Research institutions like BIDS and some leading universities in the country such as BUET can train BMET personnel and monitor its activities time to time.

In Bangladesh post offices have the most extensive coverage from district to village level and hence, each post office at the *Thana* (an intermediate level between a district and a village) level should be equipped with a computer and Internet services. Prospective migrants and their family members can access those computers to check job market situation in the overseas and as media to sending and receiving messages. This will also save the migrants and their families from the huge loss of time and money, which they incur in the process of communication in the absence of Internet services. Moreover in this process the gateway of power will be thrown open to the underprivileged section of population who largely been bypassed from the benefits of the country's mainstream development efforts. By means of spread of information technology, principles of equity and justice can be established in a society, which is notorious for persistent poverty and growing inequality despite enjoying huge flow of foreign aid. Existing evidence suggests negative correlation between poverty and infrastructure development. Spread of IT as proposed above will lead to a technological transformation at the grass root level and thus strengthening the country with more productive and competitive labour power to face the challenges of globalization of the third millennium.

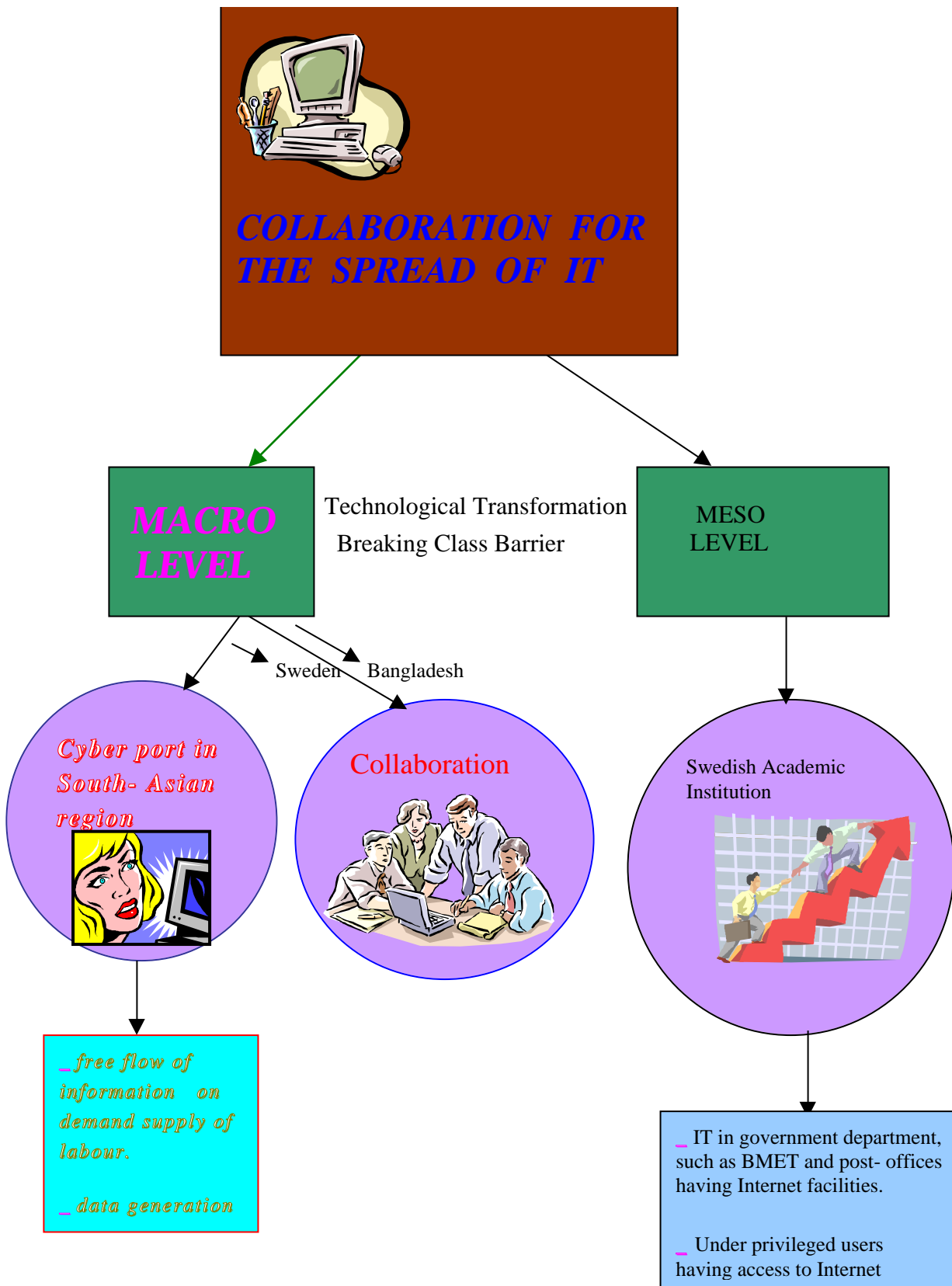


Figure 3.1 Flow Chart on Collaborative Network between Bangladesh Sweden for Spread of IT

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