

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF BANGLADESHI LABOR FORCE IN JAPAN

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Abstract

Currently, the Japanese labor market is facing an acute labor shortage due to its demographic crisis. The severity of this situation has reached such a proportion that Japan appears unable to address it internally. Hence, Japan is in dire need of foreign workers to keep its massive industries running. On the other hand, Bangladesh is witnessing a demographic dividend with a massive pool of working-age population. Therefore, the Japanese labor market holds great potential for young and skilled Bangladeshi workers. This qualitative research analyzes the current scenario of Japan's labor market and identifies opportunities and challenges for Bangladeshi workers. It reveals that a lack of cultural orientation, poor command of Japanese language and appropriate skills are major predicaments for Bangladeshi workforce in the Japanese labor market. This study recommends collaborative action immediately by the governments of Bangladesh and Japan, sending organizations (SOs) of Bangladesh and Japanese companies as well as training centers for skill development of interested workforce and removing policy barriers for the export of labor to Japan from Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Japan, Human resources development, Labor force, Opportunities, Challenges

Introduction

Massive labor shortages have become a raging headache for Japan. This issue is closely connected to Japan's demographic crisis over the years. To tackle this crisis, Japan is desperately looking for skilled workers from other countries that might temporarily fill the void. Japan is making lucrative offers and job placement opportunities for prospective foreign professionals. This can prove to be a great opportunity for Bangladesh, a country with sheer potential to raise a massive

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workforce. Skilled labor powerhouses such as the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Nepal are already taking advantage of Japan's labor shortages. Japan has been a proven partner in terms of Bangladesh's human resources development, conducting numerous initiatives over the years. Every year, a significant number of students go to Japan to pursue higher education on Japanese scholarships. Aside from academic contributions, Japan also provided training opportunities to young Bangladeshi citizens through numerous TTCs (technical training centers). Again, a considerable number of Bangladeshi citizens go to Japan as skilled and semi-skilled workers. The current trend of HRD cooperation can be enhanced further by taking prompt measures on part of both governments. Taking all these things into account, this article aims to assess the current labor market scenario in Japan when considering its demographic crisis, analyze the demand of the Bangladeshi skilled labor force in Japan, investigate Japanese initiatives in human resources development that can prove advantageous to Bangladesh, and lastly, address the key challenges concerning the Bangladeshi workforce in Japan.

Japanese society has long been characterized as a homogenous society because of its strong reluctance to accept foreigners to immigrate to Japan. However, for the past few decades, Japan has been facing a severe degree of demographic crisis triggered by a decreasing birthrate, increased aging population and again a decrease in marriage, resulting in a major policy shift concerning foreign immigrants (Hollifield & Sharpe, 2017). Japan is now welcoming skilled and semi-skilled workers from several countries to fill up its demand for workers in its wide array of sectors. This has opened a new window of opportunity for Bangladesh, which is now experiencing a demographic dividend due to a massive pool of working-age population (Akon et al., 2022). The number of working-age population, comprising both male and female workers, has been increasing significantly in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh in the past few decades. If proper measures are taken, Bangladesh can utilize this vast working-age population as effective human capital and send them to overseas labor markets, such as Japan (ADB & ILO, 2016).

Predominantly, the Middle East has been the most demanding labor market for Bangladeshi workers. However, owing to some unwanted incidents in the past several years, Bangladeshis are shifting to new labor markets. Due to Japan's relaxed visa policy and better wage security, Bangladeshi workers are becoming more and more interested in this particular labor market (Islam, 2016). At present, the number of Bangladeshi workers living in Japan is significantly lower than its peers such as Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia. Despite having a meager share of workers in the foreign labor pool in Japan, Bangladesh is gaining substantial

remittance from these workers each year (Mahmud, 2014). According to a recent survey, Japan is ranked as the 20th biggest destination for Bangladesh in terms of remittance earnings. This shows the sheer potential of this particular labor market for Bangladesh in the coming years (Akon et al., 2022). However, this massive potential is faced with a number of challenges, including language barrier, cultural barrier, information gap and lack of G2G (government-to-government) collaboration. These challenges need to be addressed sooner than later so that both countries can enjoy an absolute win-win situation (Yonezawa, 2017).

This study takes up the following research question: What are the opportunities for Bangladeshi labor force in Japan and how can these opportunities be availed removing existing challenges?

Methodology

With an eye to critically assessing the prospects and challenges of the Bangladeshi labor force in Japan, it is imperative to take the opinions of the representatives of organizations and stakeholders concerned into due consideration. It is also necessary to analyze other countries' approaches (say Vietnam, Nepal and India) and how they are gaining success in sending a relatively larger number of workers on Japan's soil consistently. To conduct this research, data was collected through three key techniques: document analysis, web surfing and interviews. This qualitative study employs an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive research approach. As for the research strategy, case study was chosen for this research. A total of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interview sessions were conducted to retrieve primary data, according to Table 1. The interview questionnaire was open-ended to allow the interviewees more freedom while giving answer to the question. The stakeholders included researchers, government and non-governmental officials, representatives of Japanese companies and business associates in Bangladesh, and also officials from JETRO and JICA.

Table 1: Category of the Interviewees

Serial	Category	Number of Interviewees
1	Scholars and Researchers	1
2	Government and Non-Government Officials in Bangladesh	5
3	Officials of JETRO Dhaka Office	3
4	Officials of JICA Bangladesh Office	2
5	Japanese Companies and Business Associates in Bangladesh	9
Total		20

Sample Selection

For the nature of this study, much importance was given to retrieve primary data from the Japanese companies and business associates operating in Bangladesh. Nine out of the 20 interviews (n=20) were taken from this single category. It needs to be mentioned that all the Japanese companies and business associates interviewed are affiliated organizations and have their counterparts or representatives in Japan. Apart from these interviewees, five respondents belonged to government and non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh, one belonged to the academia, three were from JETRO and two from JICA (please see **Table 2**).

Table 2: List of Interviewees

Interviewee Codes	Designation	Organization
Japanese Scholars and Researchers		
Interviewee-1	Assistant Professor	Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka
Government and Non-Government Officials in Bangladesh		
Interviewee-5	-	Retired Secretary to the Government of Bangladesh; Former Chairman of NBR
Interviewee-7	Founding Member	BAAS, JUAAB, JBCCI, BIA
Interviewee-9 Executive Consultant		TMSS
Interviewee-10	Sector Head (ICT & Environment)	TMSS
Interviewee-19	PR & Cultural Specialist	Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh
Officials of JETRO Dhaka Office		
Interviewee-2	Senior Director	JETRO Dhaka
Interviewee-3	Assistant Manager	JETRO Dhaka
Interviewee-18	Country Representative, Bangladesh	JETRO Dhaka
Officials of JICA Bangladesh Office		
Interviewee-4	Program Officer	JICA Bangladesh Office
Interviewee-20	Chief Representative	JICA Bangladesh Office
Japanese Companies and Business Associates in Bangladesh		
Interviewee-6	Chairman	NewVision Solutions Ltd.
Interviewee-8	President & CEO	Linkers Trading Co. Ltd.
Interviewee-11	Managing Director	Jabachi International Co. Ltd.
Interviewee-12	Head of Operation Manager	Global Recruiting Agency

Interviewee-13	President & CEO	Sadiatec
Interviewee-14	Managing Director	Kokorozashi & Kazuko-Bhuiyan Japanese Cultural Center
Interviewee-15	Principal	Kokorozashi & Kazuko-Bhuiyan Japanese Cultural Center
Interviewee-16	Managing Director	NewVision Solutions Ltd.
Interviewee-17	Founder & CEO	Kaicom Solutions

Data Collection Procedure

It took the authors around 16 months to take all the 20 interviews. The research project came to a halt due to a number of difficulties. It, therefore, took this inordinate time to complete the interview process. These semi-structured qualitative interviews were arranged both online and offline as per the interviewees' preferences. For Japanese interviewees, interview sessions were conducted in English for their convenience. On the other hand, for Bangladeshi interviewees, the sessions were conducted in their native Bangla language. Each session lasted around 30 minutes on average. Before arranging the sessions, formal appointments of the participants were taken through emails or phone calls. All the participants were provided with the participant's information sheet and the consent form beforehand. It was made sure that all the interviewees became well informed about the key objectives of this research project. Upon taking due permission, the interview sessions were recorded and transcribed by second and third authors. It was properly maintained that all the interviewees were feeling absolutely comfortable while attending the sessions.

Findings

Opportunities Concerning Bangladeshi Workforce in Japan

IM Japan

The Public Interest Foundation International Manpower Development Organization, abbreviated to IM Japan, serves as a comprehensive entity for oversight. IM Japan assumes responsibility for receiving foreign technical interns directly dispatched by the governments of Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. What is more, it endeavors to facilitate and advance the accurate comprehension and proficient implementation of the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) for foreign nationals (IMM, 2023). With an advertisement in national dailies published by BMET, the application process starts for technical interns. This internship leads

to a five-year working condition, and all interested applicants must go through the BMET website for further proceedings. A list of selected candidates is prepared after taking some physical tests, and a batch of 20–30 is formed to be trained in ‘Japanese Language and Culture’ under the Bangladesh-Germen Technical Training Center for six months and sent to the residential system in Japan. Another one month’s training is undertaken by Kasukabe Training Center in Japan. Finally, they are appointed in different organizations along with the remuneration system (BGTTC, 2024; Interviewee 12, 2023).

Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)

The Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) serves as a systematic framework to attract talented young individuals from underdeveloped nations to Japan. This program facilitates the employment of foreign trainees across a multitude of sectors, encompassing 146 distinct occupations spanning 82 sectors, thereby enabling them to cultivate practical skills while receiving remuneration. The duration of the training period is capped at a maximum of five years, during which trainees also undergo lessons in Japanese language to enhance their proficiency. The major goal of the TITP is to help developing countries acquire high-quality human resources rather than meeting Japan’s labor needs in a cost-effective manner (IMM, 2023; Interviewee 9, 2023).

Opportunities for Highly Skilled Professionals

J-Skip VISA

Japan introduced the special Highly Skilled Professional (J-Skip) system in 2023 to attract professionally skilled personnel from all over the world. An applicant for this visa must be associated with any activity organization or contracting organization fulfilling the criteria of a minimum annual income ceiling in Japan. Advanced academic research activities, specialized or technical activities and business management activities are the eligible programs under this visa. A master’s degree and 10 years of work experience with an annual income of at least 20 million yen can make them eligible for J-Skip. This system allows one to stay for five years in Japan (Leap Scholar, 2024).

J-Find Visa

J-Find Visa is another category of visa to attract highly skilled professionals in specific fields like information technology, artificial intelligence, robotics and other technologies. To facilitate talent acquisition and spur economic growth,

this visa system was introduced in 2023. This visa allows young professionals to extend their stay, switch jobs and get involved in multiple activities. An applicant must have a master's degree or PhD with personal savings of around 200,000 yen to support themselves (Leap Scholar, 2024).

Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Program

The term 'specified skilled worker' (SSW) refers to a residency status designated for foreign nationals engaged in occupations requiring substantial expertise or experience within specified industrial fields. This status is valid for up to five years and requires renewal thereafter. An applicant must pass the skills standard test unlike the one who completed the Technical Intern Training Program. Conversational Japanese language literacy is also required. The SSW categories include nursing care, agriculture, food service, the automobile sector and eight other categories, offering sustainable work opportunities for a wide range of foreign experts (MOFA, 2023; Interviewee 11, 2023).

Visa Opportunities for Bangladeshi Workforce in Japan

The 'specified skilled worker' designation permits employment in various professional sectors that encompass construction, hospitality, nursing and manufacturing fields. An applicant is not required to possess a degree but must pass technical skills assessment and demonstrate proficiency in Japanese to some extent. This program offers two categories: Type-01 permits workers to reside in Japan for up to five years, albeit without an option to keep their families with them. On the other hand, Type-02 is tailored for more highly qualified individuals, allowing for indefinite extensions and enabling their families to accompany them in Japan. Moreover, Type-01 holders are eligible to upgrade to Type-02 status after five years. Additionally, there exists the 'Technical Intern Training Program,' facilitating foreign workers in acquiring specialized skills in a Japanese workplace that may not be readily available in their home countries. Upon completion of this program, participants become eligible to transition to the aforementioned 'Specified Skills' Type-01 status (Japan Guide, 2023).

Legal Amendments

Top of Form

The 1989 Amendment to the ICA

The 1989 amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act

(ICA) marks a significant juncture in Japan's approach to foreign labor. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Japanese cabinet adhered to a policy of non-reception towards foreign workers. However, the discourse shifted in the 1980s, leading to discussions regarding the acceptance of migrant labor. Notably, the Ministry of Labor proposed the Employment Permit System in 1988, heralding a pivotal moment. Subsequently, the 1989 amendment to the ICA was introduced, facilitating the granting of permanent residency status. This amendment aimed to encourage migration, prompting modifications to Japan's labor laws in 1990 (Akon, 2022).

The 2009 Amendment to the ICA

The 2009 amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICA) introduced several significant provisions aimed at enhancing terms and conditions for technical interns during their internship period. This amendment stipulates that any tasks undertaken without classroom-based instruction are to be classified as labor. Additionally, the Japanese government implemented a point-based system designed to attract highly skilled foreign professionals. Under this system, academic background and professional experience serve as key criteria for point allocation (Yamanaka, 1993).

The 2016 Technical Internship Act

The 2016 Technical Internship Act was legislated out of employers' aspirations to prolong the duration of engagement for technical interns. In response, a comprehensive study was commissioned by experts under the purview of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW). After the findings of this inquiry, the act pertaining to the proper implementation of technical internships for foreigners and the protection of technical internships was promulgated in 2016. Notably, this legislation gives technical interns, who have completed a three-year program, an opportunity to undertake an additional two-year internship upon their return to their home countries. However, it is imperative to highlight a significant restriction imposed by this act: the prohibition of transitioning to another company during the internship period (Japanese Law Translation, 2016).

The 2018 Amendment to the ICA

The 2018 amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICA) heralded a significant shift in Japan's approach to accepting foreign migrants, instigated by the proposal put forth by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Before

this amendment, the admission of family members to Japan was prohibited. The provision introduced two distinct visa categories: Type-01 for semi-skilled laborers and Type-02 for highly skilled professionals. Individuals entering Japan under the Type-01 visa category are required to possess advanced technical and Japanese language proficiencies. Moreover, their visa duration cannot be extended (Japanese Law Translation, 2016). Conversely, individuals holding a Type-02 visa are distinguished by their exceptional professional skills, obviating the necessity for Japanese language proficiency. Notably, they have the privilege of extending the duration of their visa and are permitted to bring family members to Japan.

Challenges Concerning Bangladeshi Workforce in Japan

Language Gap

Proficiency in Japanese language is an essential prerequisite for employment in Japan due to its extensive use in daily life and workplace interactions. However, the language competency level of Bangladeshi workers is relatively very low. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test, particularly at levels N3 and N4, is a prerequisite for labor migration to Japan. An estimated 70% of the entire immigrant workforce in Japanese enterprises is compelled to use Japanese as the first and only language, contributing to difficulties in communication for new workers (Interviewee 14, 2024; Interviewee 15, 2024; Yonezawa, 2017). Moreover, the Japanese language centers in Bangladesh hold significantly low success and collaboration records in terms of sending Bangladeshi labor force to Japan. They are more focused on increasing their profits instead of maintaining quality. Also, they don't have any unified language curriculum (Interviewee 16, 2024; Interviewee 2, 2023).

Expectation Gap

A notable disparity exists between the skillset of the Bangladeshi workforce and the specific requirements demanded by Japan. Failure to meet Japan's expectations could lead to its diminished interest in accepting workers from Bangladesh, resulting in the loss of a significant market opportunity (Interviewee 1, 2023; Islam, 2016). At present, Bangladesh considerably lacks skilled manpower, adequate training facilities and qualified trainers. This scarcity of skilled personnel poses a significant challenge to meeting Japan's internal demands (Interviewee 3, 2023; Interviewee 5, 2023).

Cultural Gap

Bangladesh, with its predominantly Muslim population, holds strong religious sentiments that significantly influence societal activities. In striking contrast, Japan adopts a rather neutral stance concerning religion, although there is a prevailing negative perception of Islam among the Japanese populace. Adapting to the cultural nuances of Japan poses a significant challenge for Bangladeshi workers. Punctuality, respect for schedules and effective time management are key aspects of Japanese work culture (Interviewee 4, 2023; Akon, 2022).

Information Gap

Bangladeshi workers face challenges in navigating Japan's labor market due to an information gap. This knowledge disparity encompasses unfamiliarity with Japanese work culture, legal procedures and employment rights. Japan's distinct work culture, characterized by hierarchical structures and adherence to strict schedules, may pose difficulties for Bangladeshi workers in adjusting to these norms and values (Interviewee 17, 2024; Interviewee 19, 2024). Moreover, insufficient awareness of legal rights and obligations can render workers vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. Securing suitable employment opportunities and understanding the overall recruitment process can prove difficult for Bangladeshis due to limited access to jobs and language barrier (Interviewee 20, 2024).

Physical and Mental Distress

Difficult, dirty and dangerous jobs, more widely known as 3D jobs, are the most recognized labor pools for migrant workers in Japan (Interviewee 8, 2023; Quandt et al., 2013). Caregiving, housekeeping, hotel work and farming are some of the most demanding sectors for foreign workers there. Housekeepers or hotel attendees need to conduct a lot of muscle-straining tasks. Repetitive motion, fast-paced work and heavy lifting of cleaning equipment are the features of their jobs that may often cause various injuries (Interviewee 10, 2023; CCOHS, 2016; Panikkar et al., 2014; Hsieh et al., 2016). Musculoskeletal injury is prevalent among workers in the agricultural sector as they encounter exposure to hazardous equipment, crush injuries, repetitive motion and falls (Cartwright et al., 2014; Hall & Greenman, 2015; Liebman et al., 2016; Liebman et al., 2013). Construction workers become victims of fatal injuries in the workplace due to the hazardous nature of jobs such as high elevations, large cutting tools and heavy lifting (Interviewee 13, 2023; Panikkar et al., 2014; Dong et al., 2017). Construction workers deal with chemical paints that contain ammonia and other harmful particles, leading to respiratory

diseases or even cancer (Hsieh et al., 2016; Hsieh et al., 2013; Panikkar et al., 2014). Foreign workers often suffer from severe mental distress due to issues such as stress, exploitation, gender discrimination, a lack of effective communication and such (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2008).

Lack of Adequate Collaboration and Sponsorship

A lack of collaboration is visible between the embassy and the respective sending organizations (SOs) in Bangladesh. A significant number of the SOs focus mostly on their profits rather than maintaining the quality of their work. There is much knowledge gap in certain areas throughout the process as well (Interviewee 18, 2024). Moreover, the sponsorship and supervision from the government of Bangladesh's side seem considerably inadequate in this field so far (Interviewee 7, 2023). Without strict supervision from the government's end, maintaining progress in terms of sending workers to Japan will not be possible.

Securing Proper Channels

Unfortunately, a considerable lack of reliable sending organizations is there in Bangladesh. Many interested young Bangladeshis fall into traps of fraudulent agencies, and such cases cause much hindrance to the labor migration process. Also, the SOs have a lack of capable trainers, which is another barrier to the Bangladeshi labor migration to Japan. Securing proper channels and ensuring capable trainers are more than necessary to fully utilize the Japanese labor market to feed Bangladesh's interests (Interviewee 7, 2023).

Delay in Procedures and Paperwork

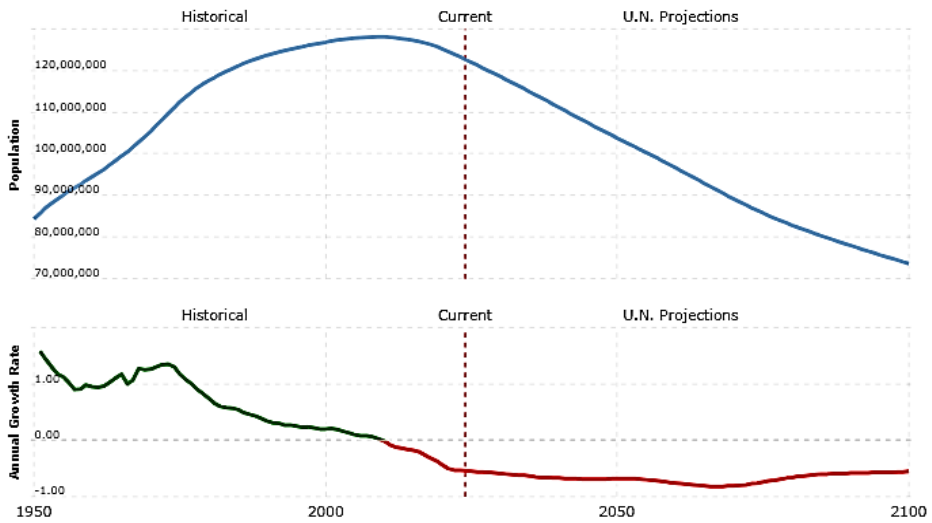
Bangladesh consistently faces inordinate delays in necessary procedures and paperwork when dispatching workers to foreign countries, including Japan. Hence, Bangladesh is falling behind countries with relatively less population, including Nepal, Cambodia and Vietnam, in terms of sending workforce. For example, it takes six months to complete all the procedures of Bangladeshi workers to send them on the TITP Program to Japan, whereas it takes less than three months to bring workers from Cambodia, Nepal or Vietnam to Japan (Interviewee 14, 2024; Interviewee 6, 2023).

Discussion

Demographic Downturn in Japan

The most recent statistics regarding Japan's demographic trajectory paint a grim picture—the number of individuals who passed away in 2022, amounting to 1.56 million, starkly contrasts with a meager number of births recorded at 771,000. According to data derived from residency registrations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications projects a staggering net population decrease of grossly 800,000 over the past year. This marks the most substantial decline in population figures since comparable data began to be systematically compiled in 1968. Presently, Japan's citizenry stands at 122.4 million, a notable decrease from its pinnacle of more than 128 million some 15 years ago (Macrotrends, 2024).

Figure 01: Japan's Population Growth Rate 1950-2024



Source: Data Derived from Macrotrends, 2024

The challenge of Japan's diminishing population is not a recent development. Since the 1990s, successive administrations in Japan have been cognizant of the impending decline in population and have endeavored to propose remedies. However, the pace of this contraction has even taken seasoned experts aback. As an illustration, in 2017, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, based in Tokyo, projected that the annual count of births would not dip below the 800,000 mark until 2030. It is cautioned that the nation stood at the precipice of a crisis and announced that the administration would allocate approximately 20 trillion yen (equivalent to roughly €128 billion or \$140 billion) towards initiatives aimed at

aiding young couples desiring to expand their families. This expenditure accounts for about 4.0% of Japan's GDP and represents nearly double the amount earmarked by the government for the same objective in fiscal year 2021.

Japan's necessity for roughly four times the number of foreign workers compared to the 2020 level by 2040 to meet the government's economic objectives has been highlighted by parties concerned earlier. Nonetheless, achieving this goal necessitates Japan first establishing an environment conducive to safeguarding human rights of migrant workers and then advocating societal shifts towards greater acceptance of foreigners (CNN, 2023).

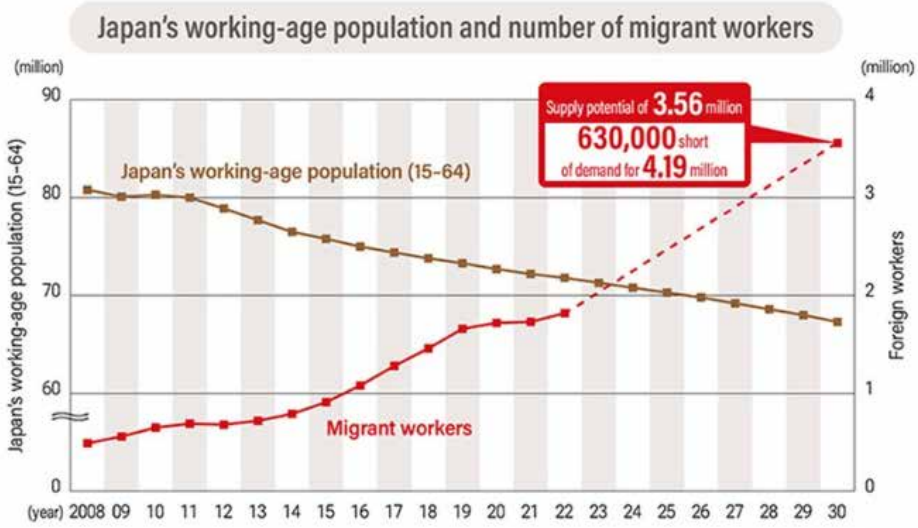
Human-led activities are being highly hampered by this growing decline in active young people, making the country hyper-aged. As Japan has experienced 21% population growth over the past 65 years, that warns of reaching around 40% of retirement age within the next 25 years (The Guardian, 2023). Human resources are not easily replaceable. Even after production, it requires rearing with the added investment of other resources. Therefore, another concern arises about using those resources very sensibly. In Russia, it can be clearly seen that the deaths of 100,000 soldiers in the Ukraine-Russia War have exemplified a devastated and heinous use of human resources. In Japan, there is a firm reluctance to join the army, which results in a strained force size (Tokyo Review, 2023).

Although the government broadened the scope of skilled immigrant workers to encompass skilled blue-collar workers, a shift from the earlier emphasis solely on graduates, there was a notable rise in the Japanese language requirement, constituting a form of restriction. By 2070, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research forecasts that more than 10% of Japan's total population, amounting to 9.4 million individuals, will originate from overseas. This skepticism arises particularly in light of projections indicating a decline in the total population to 87 million by that time, down from the current 125 million (The Guardian, 2023). Considering the existing labor market dynamics, the prospect of accessing the Japanese labor market holds significant importance for Bangladesh. Unlike traditional labor destinations such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia and Singapore, which have imposed stringent conditions on Bangladeshi workers, Japan represents a promising avenue. Maintaining access to the Japanese labor market is imperative for Bangladesh's remittance sector, as its economic sustainability relies heavily on hard-earned foreign remittance. Therefore, failure to secure opportunities in Japan would rather jeopardize Bangladesh's remittance inflows and hinder its economic stability.

Current Labor Market in Japan

It is widely acknowledged all over the world that the expertise of humans cannot be superseded by the excellence of technology. Japan is facing an acute labor shortage in nursing and care of the elderly, the public sector, taxi firms, forestry companies and train operation sectors. As of now, 29 out of Japan’s 47 prefectures are already experiencing the repercussions of a shortage of teachers. In response, the ministry initiated a project last year with a budget of 500 million yen (approximately €3.1 million or \$3.3 million) aimed at enticing more university graduates to pursue a career in teaching. However, local governments similar to those in the private sector will encounter difficulties in filling vacancies, particularly when young individuals have the option to seek higher-paying positions in the more coveted urban centers. The labor supply has shrunk in the transportation sector due to low wages. A new law has imposed work-hour limitations that might aggravate the situation even more. It is being identified by NK Logistics Research Institute and Consulting Inc. that due to a labor shortage; transportation capacity will be encountered with a steep decline of 34% in the next six years, avoiding 940 million metric tonnes of goods delivery. The reality has already started to be reflected in a 40% fall in taxi drivers from 2009 to 2021 (DW, 2024).

Figure 02: Japan’s Working-Age Population and Number of Migrant Workers



Sources: (For population) National Institute of Population and Social Security Research; (for trends in migrant workers) Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare; (for forecasts of demand for and supply potential of migrant workers in 2030) JICA Ogata Research Institute.

Source: Data Derived from JICA, 2020

Priority Sectors in the Japanese Market

Sectors that require a human touch are highly sought-after for Bangladeshi labor. There is sort of reluctance among younger Japanese individuals to pursue careers particularly in fields such as agriculture, nursing, manufacturing and household services due to a perceived lack of dedication. This presents a significant opportunity for Bangladeshi workers to fill these positions. Additionally, the information technology (IT) sector in Japan exhibits a substantial demand, further underscoring the potential for Bangladesh to supply skilled labor in this area. To capitalize on these opportunities, Bangladesh must prioritize the provision of training in sectors where Japan requires manpower. The government can establish numerous training centers dedicated to imparting the necessary skills to the workforce. Furthermore, private organizations can play a pivotal role in facilitating the training and deployment of skilled workers to Japan.

Japan is coming up with various growth sectors that will emphasize environmental and social values. There are 14 growth sectors to be developed by 2050, and these will contribute to the sustainable development of the country. These sectors bring not only advantages to the environment, but also to the economy. In addition to establishing carbon neutrality, new industrial appearances are increasing, which indicates new employment opportunities. Meanwhile, it can be realized that since Japan lacks a sufficient labor supply, foreign labor can be a mandatory option for Japan, and eventually Bangladeshi labor finds some promising sectors to be employed (METI, 2020).

Figure 03: 14 Growth Sectors in Japan



Source: Derived from METI, 2020

The demand for human resources in hotels and other inn-operating businesses and industries is always at its peak. By the end of 2023, recruitment advertisements had exceeded 28,000 job offers. Even the Covid-19 pandemic had a moderate impact on this demand. In 2019, the demand was 20% less than that in 2023. The increasing demand has always reflected a step ahead by 10% of all other sectors' demands. This presents another lucrative scope for employment in Japan for foreign workers (Nikkei Asia, 2024).

Accommodation Facility for Migrant Workers

The living costs in Japan are often perceived as prohibitively high, although this is not invariably the case. With careful budgeting and prudent choices, individuals can manage to live in Japan with relatively modest expenses. Furthermore, compared to Middle-Eastern countries, the migration costs associated with relocating to Japan are comparatively lower. In certain instances, Japanese employers may even cover the migration expenses of immigrants. Additionally, some employers provide accommodation facilities within or near the workplace, further mitigating living costs (Mahmud, 2014). The provision of accommodation for Bangladeshi workers in Japan can vary based on the specific arrangements made by employers. Some employers may offer various housing options, including company dormitories, shared apartments or other types of lodging. Although the type and standard of accommodation may differ, it is typically organized and subsidized by the employer as part of the overall employment package.

It is said that Tokyo is one of the costliest cities to live in. Savings for the future can be precluded due to this expensive accommodation unless a very well-paid job can be secured. Therefore, for any long-term accommodation in Japan, hostels and dormitories are best suited for students and other foreign workers, who find them comparably affordable and convenient. Included facilities like lodging and meals render great service to the people. Moreover, some jobs offer dormitories where rent facilities are also provided by the employers to different extents. Farming jobs, factory work, caregiving jobs, construction work, restaurant work (cooking and waiting tables) and office work are some types of jobs that are associated with accommodation facilities. Employees can get benefits from their employers in different ways, which are as follows:

- Free accommodation for the employees as part of the pay package
- Shared charges (half by employer, half by employee)
- Salary-charged facility (Rent is cut automatically from the salary as employees take company accommodation service)

- Lodging facility (In farming jobs, workers may find accommodation within the owner's house with a charged or non-charged option)

For students and workers, software apps like the Work Japan App help them find jobs that offer accommodation according to location, charging expectations and other details (Work Japan, 2023).

Support for Foreign Human Resources

Japan has already faced more than a double increase in foreign workers from 2011 to 2021. With the demand for an estimated 67,40,000 foreign workers by 2040, Japan is working on developing sustainable economic growth. An estimated half of the workers are from developing countries, and so is Japan trying to establish distinctions to attract foreign workers. JICA is one of the most prominent organizations, taking multiple measures to represent Japan before foreign workers. Complying with the following four principles of work, JICA takes the initiative to support foreign workers. The principles are as follows:

- i. Economic growth in developing countries and regional revitalization in Japan
- ii. Developing an environment and capacity for foreign workers
- iii. Establishing an inclusive cultural society in Japan
- iv. Providing after-return home benefits to foreign workers (JICA, 2022)

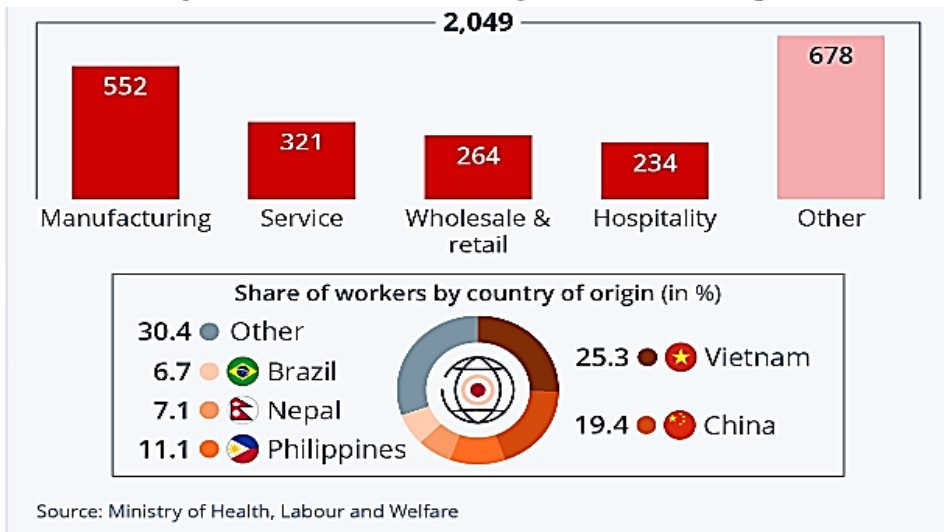
Demand for Foreign Workers in Japanese Labor Market

Immigration trends typically stem from a variety of factors, including geopolitical tensions, state coercion, life-threatening circumstances, unemployment and low wages. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Japanese cabinet enacted policies against foreign labor influxes. However, by the 1980s, a nationwide discourse emerged in Japan regarding the acceptance of foreign workers. Despite initial opposition from the Ministry of Justice, the Japanese government-initiated reforms to its Immigration Control Act (ICA) in 1990 (Akon et al., 2022).

Migration to any country is often driven by push and pull factors. Push factors such as war, poverty, natural disasters and insecurity compel individuals to leave their home countries. Conversely, pull factors such as employment opportunities, economic prosperity, political stability and favorable living conditions attract immigrants to destinations like Japan. Concerns about unskilled and unauthorized foreign labor arose in Japan in the late 1980s, prompting legal avenues for foreign entry and streamlined visa application procedures. The Immigration Bureau

became actively involved in recruiting foreigners, and legislation was enacted to penalize the hiring of illegal unskilled workers (Yamuna, 1993). Japan's immigrant population stands at a mere 2.0%. However, projections by the United Nations indicate a need for approximately 17 million net immigrants by 2050 to maintain Japan's population levels as of 2005. To achieve this, an estimated 381,000 immigrants per year are required between 2005 and 2050. Although the percentage of registered foreign nationals in Japan was 1.74% in 2008 (down from 23% in 2003), foreign nationals are believed to be rising steadily, suggesting a positive trend for Japan (Hollifield & Sharpe, 2017).

Figure 04: The State of Foreign Workforce in Japan



Source: Derived from Statista, 2024

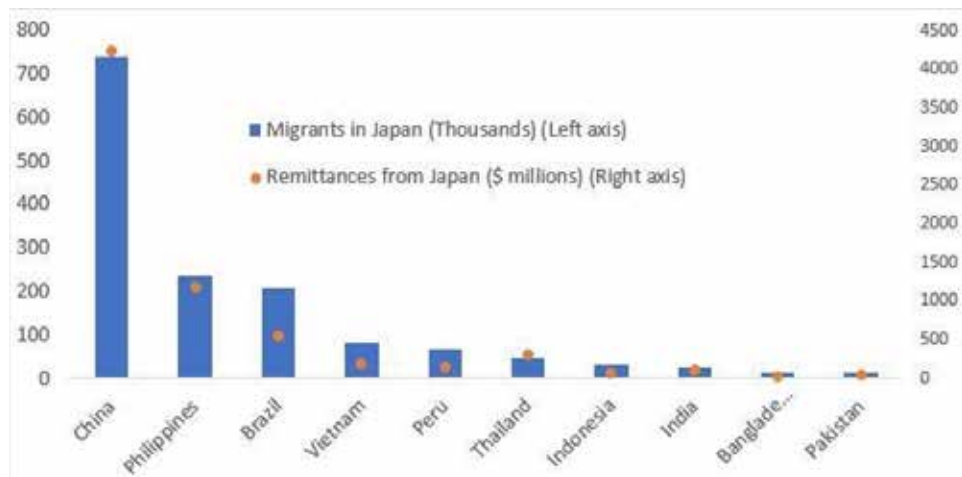
Despite these trends, the number of foreign workers in Japan has decreased in recent years, resulting in 8.0% fewer visitors to the country. Training programs have become increasingly popular among Japanese companies due to lower labor costs. Notably, the number of foreign migrants in Japan surged from 2,475 in 1985 to 372,305 by 2008, primarily from Brazil and Peru. Japan ranks third in terms of the Latin American immigrants. However, Bangladeshi laborers comprise only 0.02% of Japan's workforce, positioning Japan 20th in terms of remittance earnings for Bangladesh. Japan's population growth rate stood at 1.5% in 2000, with 86% of Japanese females marrying by age 20 and a median marriage age of 16 years. Technical and vocational education enrolment in Japan remains low at 2.43%, compared to 6.31% in Malaysia and 18.41% in China. The agricultural

sector in Japan has declined by 2.5% from 2006 to 2014 due to depopulation, while the construction sector flourished during the 2000s but experienced a 4.0% decline in 2013. Conversely, Bangladesh’s employment rate was 4.0% in 2013.

Labor Migration Trends from Bangladesh to Japan

Recently, Japan has grappled with a labor shortage stemming from its low birth rate and prolonged life expectancy. In response, the Japanese government has relaxed its immigration policies to accommodate foreign workers, introducing two distinct visa categories: Type-01 and Type-02. The Type-01 visa permits foreign immigrants to engage in various sectors, including nursing care, construction and hospitality. Bangladesh has emerged as a potential source of skilled and semi-skilled labor for Japan, as evidenced by a memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries in Tokyo on 27 August 2019 with an eye to facilitating the recruitment of skilled labor from Bangladesh. According to a report from the Bangladesh government, an estimated 2,262 immigrants were granted permission to travel to Japan under the skilled worker program in October 2021. Notably, key sectors benefiting from Bangladeshi labor in Japan include nursing care, construction, machinery, metals and services. Workers recruited through labor agencies undergo skills training in Bangladesh before their deployment to Japan.

Figure 05: Migrants in Japan and their Remittances



Source: Derived from Bilateral Migration Matrix and Bilateral Remittance Matrix, 2017

However, Bangladeshi workers in Japan face numerous challenges, including linguistic barrier, cultural difference, exploitation and long working hours. Initiatives like language and cultural training programs and improved working conditions should be implemented to support them. Moreover, the Japanese government should actively address its labor shortage by welcoming more Bangladeshi immigrants. Many Bangladeshi workers in Japan are employed in unskilled positions, often performing what are commonly referred to as 3D jobs (Yamuna, 1993).

Policy Recommendations

Upon analyzing the interviews along with the secondary data retrieved while doing this research, some intriguing insights have surfaced and caught the attention of the authors. To fully utilize the opportunity of entering into Japan's vast labor market, several areas should be given a sharp focus. This section highlights some policy recommendations that might come in handy while doing so.

- a. Promoting Japanese Language and Culture:** The government of Bangladesh should put great emphasis on promoting Japanese language learning, business communication, and Japanese culture and values. The Japanese language centers operating in Bangladesh should introduce more capable instructors. Proper training programs should be designed to enhance instructors' capacities.
- b. People-to-people Exchange:** Learning and exchanging cultural values and norms of both Bangladesh and Japan at the P2P (people-to-people) level is of paramount importance. In order to penetrate the Japanese labor market in a more sustainable manner, promoting and branding Bangladesh highly in Japan is imperative.
- c. Facilitating TTCs:** The government of Bangladesh should focus more on increasing facilities at its existing TTCs and vocational schools for nurturing young manpower in a more sustainable manner. More TTCs should be established throughout the country as well.
- d. Industry-Academia Collaboration:** Bangladesh should focus on establishing industry-academia collaboration to penetrate the Japanese labor market in a more robust way. For this to be done, the existing education system of Bangladesh needs to be reformed, and new curricula should be offered to students as per global standards.
- e. Mending Existing Gaps:** The government of Bangladesh should mend all the existing gaps in the policymaking areas and enhance cooperation at the government-to-government (G2G) level. Effective steps should be taken from

Bangladesh's side to attain the absolute benefit from Japan's relaxed visa policy.

- f. Eliminating Middleman-ship:** Bangladesh must eliminate all kinds of middlemanship and deceitful activities of sending organizations. All SOs should focus on adopting a more sustainable approach for manpower business instead of just focusing on profits.
- g. Maintaining Competent SOs:** It is imperative to encourage the capable SOs to target penetrating the vast Japanese labor market besides other alternatives at present. Moreover, establishing more manpower companies and SOs that will maintain reliability and professionalism is necessary.
- h. Exploring New Possibilities:** In addition to the current target areas, Bangladesh should explore other promising areas for sending manpower to Japan (e.g., food and beverage, cleaning, driving and automobile sectors). The government of Bangladesh should study countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, or Nepal's strategies of penetrating the Japanese labor market.
- i. Changing Mindset:** The overall work culture and mentality of Bangladeshis need to be changed for effectively utilizing the Japanese labor market. Qualities such as punctuality, integrity and trustworthiness should be strongly embraced by people in general. Ethical and moral values are of great importance to Japanese recruiters.
- j. Political Stability:** Bangladesh must maintain its domestic political stability to maintain a smooth and consistent exchange of human resources with Japan. Political unrest always poses a threat to a favorable business climate.

Conclusion

Given the current circumstances, Japan desperately needs a large pool of trained and semi-skilled laborers to plug the gap in its domestic labor market. Hence, a well-timed opportunity presents itself to densely populated emerging economies like Bangladesh when it comes to the demographic issue. To take full advantage of this opportunity, Bangladesh and Japan must address a few issues. One of the most challenging tasks on Japan's side is to make sure that people have financially rewarding jobs that also provide for professional advancement and job stability. Another daunting task for Japan is to mitigate the bottlenecks for foreign workers, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and salary discrimination. For Bangladesh, the most pressing issue at hand is providing training to its large pool of young laborers for required skill sets, particularly in Japanese language, culture, and work ethics. The modern employment market is

demanding, competitive, and changing quickly. Thus, gaining the ability to adjust to this dynamic market is a requirement that the Bangladeshi labor force must meet without fail. Bangladesh has long depended on Japan as a reliable partner for the development of its human resources through technical education and training. Japan has been funding multiple TTCs with a sizable sum of money. Both nations are parties to multiple accords pertaining to the development of human resources efficiently. Many Japanese businesses are currently functioning in Bangladesh, providing many native professionals with lucrative job possibilities and thereby boosting youth employment in the recipient nation. In the near future, Bangladesh may undoubtedly expect to see a revolutionary advancement if this encouraging uptrend in migration gets going.

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Annex 1

Figures

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Annex 2

List of Interviewee

No.	Coded Name	Organization	Designation	Interview Date
1	Interviewee 1	Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka	Assistant Professor	29-05-2023
2	Interviewee 2	JETRO Dhaka	Senior Director	31-05-2023
3	Interviewee 3	JETRO Dhaka	Assistant Manager	31-05-2023
4	Interviewee 4	JICA Bangladesh Office	Program Officer	04-06-2023
5	Interviewee 5	Retired Secretary to the Government of Bangladesh; Former Chairman of NBR	-	24-06-2023
6	Interviewee 6	NewVision Solutions Ltd.	Chairman	25-06-2023
7	Interviewee 7	BAAS, JUAAB, JBCCI, BIA	Founding member	27-06-2023
8	Interviewee 8	Linkers Trading Co. Ltd.	President & CEO	26-10-2023
9	Interviewee 9	TMSS	Executive Consultant	29-10-2023
10	Interviewee 10	TMSS	Sector Head (ICT & Environment)	29-10-2023
11	Interviewee 11	Jabachi International Co. Ltd.	Managing Director	30-10-2023
12	Interviewee 12	Global Recruiting Agency	Head of Operation Manager	31-10-2023
13	Interviewee 13	Sadiatec	President & CEO	06-11-2023
14	Interviewee 14	Kokorozashi & Kazuko-Bhuiyan Japanese Cultural Center	Managing Director	29-08-2024
15	Interviewee 15	Kokorozashi & Kazuko-Bhuiyan Japanese Cultural Center	Principal	29-08-2024
16	Interviewee 16	NewVision Solutions Ltd.	Managing Director	30-08-2024
17	Interviewee 17	Kaicom Solutions	Founder & CEO	31-08-2024
18	Interviewee 18	JETRO Dhaka	Country Representative, Bangladesh	01-09-2024
19	Interviewee 19	Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh	PR & Cultural Specialist	01-09-2024
20	Interviewee 20	JICA Bangladesh Office	Chief Representative	04-09-2024