

The Role of Blue-Collar Migrant Labour in Industries of Western Province, Sri Lanka

Jothimuni Manoj Suranga^a and Wijamuni Durage Thilak Padmasiri^b

^aLovely Professional University, Jalandhar-Delhi G.T. Road, National Highway 1, Phagwara, Punjab 144411, India

^bUniversity of Sri Jayawardenapura, Gangodawila, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
jmsosho@gmail.com, wdthilak@gmail.com

Abstract

This research discusses the role of blue-collar migrant labour in industries of Western Province, Sri Lanka. In order to make an exploratory qualitative research, social and economic aspects of their role were taken into the account. For this investigation, we selected two industrial zones in western province; Katunayake and Biyagama. Labour migration can be occurred in between two countries as well as one area to another area in the same country. The data was collected by in-depth interviews with 25 participants (20 migrant workers and 05 industrialists) at five organizations. After analyzing data, it is concluded that all the workers have migrated due to the lack of job opportunities at their native provinces. In some instances they have to face some social and economic issues due to the migration.

Keywords: labour migration, blue-collar migrant labour, industrialization, living conditions, productivity

Introduction

Labour migration is the process of moving a labour force from one physical location to another. Migration of people occurs due to various reasons: ethnic conflicts, natural disaster, political instability, economic distress as well as search for economic and social improvement and so on. Migration is not a recent phenomenon. For centuries, there are evidences of people moving from one country to another or one area to another.

The developed and urban areas have created a demand of labour and the less developed areas have become the supplier of labour requirements. Rural to urban migration is a very important pattern of migration, especially can be identified in developing countries such as Sri Lanka. Mass migration to cities and industrially developed areas has become a part of the development process of regions, creating imbalance in development and growth among states or provinces and its residents (Deshingkar, 2004). The contribution of the migrant workforce to urban development is tremendous. In addition, the process of liberalization, privatization and globalization, especially since nineteenth decade of last century, have enhanced the phase of internal migration of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers from rural to urban areas. (Pattanaik, 2006).

It can be identified ostensible dualities regarding the labour migration, especially in developing countries. In those economies, it can be identified two sectors which are evolving together. There is the modern sector which has developed living and working conditions. However, non-modern sector of the country which is highly consisting with low income population who are struggling to fulfill basic needs of their lives. This non-modern sector has very limited opportunities which offer decent work. Their working opportunities are restricted by low level of education, lack of experiences, poor health conditions, lack of job opportunities and poor social status. Most of them are suffering with low paid works with lesser chances of attaining their work potential.

Western province is the major industrialized and populated area of Sri Lanka as capital of the country is located here. The large and small scale factories are located in all parts of the province. Migrant workers in western province largely moved from less developed provinces such as Eastern Province, Northern Province, Uva Province and Northern Central Province. While unskilled migrants are mostly employed on casual and contract basis jobs, many skilled migrants are considered for permanent and high salaried jobs.

According to Ukwatta (1986), internal migration is very significant in Sri Lanka in redistributing the population. Internal migration is considerably high in the western province, due to many of commercial and administrative centres have been located here. As a result of modernization and changes in the economic & social conditions in Sri Lanka, female migrants were increasingly attracted to urban areas in the western province where textile and garment industries are located (Ukwatta, 2005). High economic growth in the districts of Colombo and Gampaha is especially attractive for migrants. As socio-economic development of the Sri Lanka, not only men but also women migrated to the district of Colombo for better jobs than their native areas. After establishing of free trade zone areas in Katunayake & Biyagama, internal migration has increased rapidly. As this area has not been properly researched, it is very difficult to get a prior opinion regarding the internal migration of the country.

Research Methods

As this is a qualitative study, all the research methods are designed to obtain in depth knowledge about migrant workers who are employing at industries of western province. If a researcher has a lack of knowledge about the problems they will meet during the study, an exploratory study is the most suitable investigation method. Exploratory studies are more heavily relied on qualitative techniques. In a quantitative research, a researcher is distant when collecting data but researcher is much closed with participants in the qualitative research. Quantitative researchers highly concern about how generalize research findings whereas the qualitative researcher seeks an understanding about reality of a phenomenon (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Specially social & economic backgrounds of the migrants were taken into the account when formulating the research design.

Study Design and Sample

Our field research comprising most popular qualitative research technique of in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted with blue-collar migrant labour and industrialists. Respondents were selected from five manufacturing organizations at Katunayake & Biyagama free trade zones. All the research methods were designed here in order to obtain spontaneous responses from the participants with their natural perceptions towards the subject area. It was targeted to capture their life experiences with fundamental understandings of complex interactions and relationships.

All these unstructured interviews basically aimed to cover demographical aspects, occupational status, motivational reasons for migration, role of wage differentials, impact on living conditions, family life styles and long term consumption patterns of blue-collar migrant labour. There are two groups of participants in this study, migrant workers and industrialists. The data were collected by open-ended individual interviews with 25 participants (20 migrant workers and 05 industrialists) in Katunayake and Biyagama industrial zones. According to Kvale (1997) a larger amount of respondents does not improve the quality of results significantly and it complicates the analysis process. On the other hand transcribing and analyzing of each interview is time consuming, which is often restricted due to the time limits for when a study is to be completed. A larger amount of interviews could therefore imply that the quality of the analysis would worsen (Kvale, 1997). Furthermore, the number of twenty five interviews was in satisfactory level, since the relatively small proportion made it possible to identify the respondents personally. The interviewees were found in their work place. Based on the previous experiences and situational judgments, similar questions as well as different questions were taken into the discussion. All of them agreed to do the interview and give their own viewpoints regarding the subject matter.

Data Collection

Each session of interviews lasted around forty minutes. Approximately 17 hours of interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. All these interviews were done under the approval of top management of selected organizations. The interviewer had a list of topics to cover, attempting to promote a free dialogue in ethical manner. All the discussions were carried out without any interruptions and physical or verbal barriers.

In generally, the following types of questions were taken into the discussions with blue-collar migrant labour.

- a) Where are you from?
- b) Why are you living in Western province?
- c) Why you didn't get work at your province?
- d) How many peoples are there in your family?
- e) Are you satisfied with your earnings here?

Industrialists were questioned as follows:

- a) How many employees are working here in this industry?
- b) From which provinces they are?
- c) What will be the effect on your industry if blue-collar migrant labour are not coming to Western province?
- d) Why you are unable attract labour from Western province?
- e) Do you think blue-collar migrant labour are satisfied with salaries and other atmosphere?

These kinds of questions were used by Yanzhen & Yumei (2012) for a research done in China regarding the migrant workers. Furthermore, open questions, theory-driven questions & confrontational questions (Flick, 2009) were taken into the account in order to grab spontaneous responses of the respondents.

Data Analysis

In accordance with common themes (concepts), all interviews were analyzed. In qualitative studies, data analysis is not an easy task, because each and every data has a significance value when making a conclusion about the research problem. Each and every interview has been taken into the account carefully, and identified common areas and issues were highly concerned. In order to make a consistency, the analysis of the data began following the first interview. As concepts were better identified, it became clear that they could be grouped together according to the common themes. This can be identified as the stage of category generation.

All the research coding strategies suggested that the researchers regularly address the text with the following types of basic questions (Flick, 2012). What is the issue here (what?); which persons are involved? which roles do they play? (who?); which aspects of the phenomenon are mentioned? (how?); time, course and location (when? how long? where?); which reasons are given? (why?); for which purpose? (what for?); tactics and strategies for reaching the goal (by which?).

Data Analysis

Themes

Reasons behind Migration

This is first theme according to the questions which were asked is about reasons for migration. Under this theme there are various subthemes. In accordance with these themes, reasons are drawn regarding the migration of labour.

Various Provinces

Questions were asked about their provinces to know whether the respondents are migrants or not. After knowing this answer further questions can be asked. Blue-collar migrant labour is from various provinces. Different respondents are from different provinces. They are living

in western province for work. While interviewing the respondents, they revealed about their province.

After asking the question regarding their province, respondent's answers were 'Eastern Province, Sabaragamuwa Province, Uva Province and Northern Central Province'.

Same questions were asked from the industrialists to know how much labour is engaged in their industries and from which states they are. 3 industrialists were asked the questions and response was

'Many of workers are migrants and they are from Eastern Province, Sabaragamuwa Province, Uva Province, Northern Province and Northern Central Province'.

Less Number of Industries at their Native Provinces

There are fewer industries in their own provinces. When this question was asked, answers were similar in one or other sense. Respondents replied,

'There is no work in Medawachchiya (Northern Central Province)', 'we have less lands in Pothuvil (Eastern Province) and had to work for landlords in tough situations', 'there is no work in our province, if we ever get some kind of work there that is temporary not permanent. But here after six months, we can get a permanent job'. They have migrated due to less number of industries at their native provinces.

Low Wages Paid at their Native Provinces

They revealed about their salaries and wages. 'Less wages are given to us at native provinces', 'here we are given more than Rs.15,000 salary package but there we only get around Rs.10,000. So, there is a difference'.

Industrialist also provides some information regarding this. 'We had done lot of things to make them happy. If they are happy with us then it will be benefitted for us. Our production is good. We provide them incentives, gifts etc. also. For example in some festivals we give gifts, bonus and festival advances that make them happy. We also motivate them if they had done good work that help to increase their morale. It became very difficult task nowadays to find good and skilled labour. So if labour is happy our production is good'.

To Fulfill their Needs and Wants

For low income group, salary is a one and only source through which a person can fulfill his own and family needs and wants. The other reason for migration is to fulfill their needs and wants. This question was asked in a way that are you satisfy with your salary and are you able to fulfill your needs and wants with this salary. The answers were in favor of this.

Job Satisfaction

Questions were asked about their job satisfaction. All the respondents were satisfied with their jobs here in Western province. Respondents have not satisfied with the jobs at their native places. They said,

'Works were more but earnings were less as compare to this', 'we had to work with the landlords and owners of firms in tough situations.

They are satisfied with the management and their jobs in Western province. However cost of living is comparatively high in the western province. Therefore, it is difficult save considerable amount of their current income for future expectations.

When this question was asked from the industrialist, his response was because there is less number of industries in rural areas. So, unemployment is there. Even now here families settled in western province because they are satisfied with their earnings.

Nowadays, children of blue-collar migrant labour are educated. Moreover migrant population in western province is increased. All members of the families are working in industries even women’.

Effect in Productivity

The second theme is regarding the role of migrants that is there any effect on the productivity. Various sub themes are made to get the insight about this theme.

Less Productivity

Questions were asked from the industrialists about the effect on productivity if blue-collar migrant labour are not coming. Respondent’s answers were:

‘That is natural; it is same like if there is no rain, and there is no productivity’, ‘it’s a natural thing. Due to lack of labour, our business will be spoiled because it is very difficult to find labour from western province because they are much educated and demanding for high salary jobs’, ‘migrants prefer to work under any environmental condition but not natives of the western province’.

Quality of Work

Quality of work is dependent on the skills of migrants. However migrants can easily train than locals. They do not have any other options except the current job. They do not need to train more than three months. Therefore it is not difficult to maintain the quality with blue-collar migrant labour.

Lack of Blue-Collar Labour in Western Province

This is third theme which tells us about the reasons of lack of blue-collar labour in Western province.

Development of the Education

As the result of development of the education in western province, many of youngsters do not prefer to engage in blue-collar jobs. They make a demand for high salaried jobs and foreign jobs. As a result of that, it is difficult to operate industries in western province without blue-collar migrant labour. In some instances, after sometime, blue-collar migrant labour also make such a demand for high salaries and good working conditions.

Working Skills

Working skills are very critical to perform in a job. About the working skills of labour in western province, one industrialist said,

‘Labour in western province is skilled. But they highly concern about salaries than works’.

As a result of education and many variety of training opportunities, people in western province are much educated than other provinces but they do not prefer to engage in blue-collar jobs.

Attitudes

Attitude towards blue-collar jobs is also a problem in locals of western province.

‘Youth of western province do not want to work under strict working conditions’, ‘Their dreams lead to white-collar jobs or foreign jobs’, ‘They also highly concerned about freedom of the job’.

According to above themes it can be identified that blue-collar migrant labour prefer to work in industrial firms in western province due to high salaries and less number of opportunities in their native provinces. On the other hand locals of western province keep their targets in white-collar jobs.

First theme is about the reasons behind migration, second is regarding the effect on productivity and third is lack of blue-collar workers in western province. All the three themes are interrelated; it can be explained with the help of demand and supply. There is demand for labour in western province so supply is also there but labour of western province do not want to work in blue-collar jobs because of their attitudes and education.

Relationship between Local Employees and Migrants

The relationships between local employees and migrants are very complicated. Many instances locals do not prefer to work with new migrants because of their less education, less cleanliness and negative attitudes. After sometime migrants change their attitudes and behaviors according the environment which they are working. Some migrants are settled in the western province after marriages with locals.

Conclusion

Human migration is an ongoing process. This Study is regarding the role of blue-collar migrant labour in industries of western province, Sri Lanka. As the capital is located here, western province is much industrialized and populated than other provinces. Various aspects have been studied under this regarding the reasons behind migration and its impacts on the productivity.

Major reason for the internal migration in western province is lack of job opportunities in rural areas. Similar study which was done in India, also have identified this matter as the major reason for the internal migration (Singh et al., 2013) The western province of Sri Lanka, due to a wage gap, does attract huge inflow of people from other less developed provinces of the country. Many of those migrants are not much educated like locals in western province. As a result of many educational opportunities in the western province, locals are much educated and prefer to work in while-collar jobs or foreign jobs. As a result of that, there is a huge demand for blue-collar jobs. Generally that gap is filled by migrants.

Many of them satisfy with salaries in western province but in some instances, they unable to survive with the cost of living. They do not want to go back because no any other options in their native provinces. They have very complicated relationships with locals due to their behaviors and attitudes.

References

- Assets Skills Research Team. (2007). The role of importance of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, 01-25
- Bhattacharya, P. (1998). The Informal Sector and Rural-To-Urban Migration: Some Indian Evidence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1255-1262.
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2007). *Business Research Methods*. Oxford University Press, 3rd Edition.
- Deshingkar, P. (2004). Understanding the implications of migration for pro-poor agricultural growth. Paper prepared for the DACPOVNEY Agriculture task group meeting, Helsinki, 17-18 In *DAC POVNET Agriculture Task Group Meeting, Helsinki* (pp. 17-18).
- Flick, UWE. (2009). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, SAGE Publications India. (4th Ed.)
- Kvale, S. (1997). *The qualitative research interview*, Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur. (In Swedish)
- Pattanaik, B. K. (2009). Young migrant construction workers in the unorganized urban sector. *South Asia Research*, 29(1), 19-40.
- Singh, L., Singh, I., & Ghuman, RS. (2013), Changing Character of Rural Economy and Migrant Labour in Punjab, MPRA, 57-69
- The Policy Research Institute, (2007). Migrant workers and the labour market Leads Metropolitan University. 01-05
- Ukwatta, S. (1986). Internal Migration, based on Census of Population and Housing 1981, General Report, Department of Census and Statistics, 352-66.
- Ukwatta, S. (2005) Internal Migration of Women and Development in Sri Lanka, paper presented at the Regional Conference on Migration and Development in Asia, China.
- UNIAP Regional Management Office. (2011). Estimating labour Trafficking, 01-50 www.cbsl.gov.lk/pics_n_docs/10_pub/_docs/efr/annual_report/AR2013/English/7_Chapter_03.pdf
- Yanzhen, HE., & Yumei, WANG. (2012), Empirical Study on the New-Generation Migrant Worker's Psychological Contracts in China, paper presented at the International Conference on Engineering & Business Management, 749-754.