

# TOWARDS BUILDING A MODERN ECONOMY



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## Dalals: Demons or merchants of short-term international migration?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40

government are framed by such a conceptualisation.

Recruitment of workers in Bangladesh is governed by the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013. The law clearly specifies that licensed recruiting agencies (RAs), be they private or public, are the only authorised entities to perform the task of labour recruitment for international short-term employment. However, labour recruitment functions at both the destination and in Bangladesh have become very complex and distorted. In most cases the RAs are no longer able to secure work permits directly from the overseas employers. Tiers of intermediaries including serving migrants are performing this task and the RAs have to procure the work permit from these formal and informal intermediaries. It also reveals that 1,400 RAs operational in Bangladesh do not have branch offices or any other method to directly recruit workers from the grassroots. It is generally held that the RAs conduct this work with the help of the *dalals* who are operational at the grassroots and who do not have legal basis to perform the task.

Now the question is why do people go to the *dalals*? RMMRU 2017 survey interviewed 100 *dalals* in one district alone. Contrary to popular perception, *dalals* are no outsiders in migrants' view. They hail mostly from the same locality. Twenty-seven percent of them are from the migrants' own villages and another 17 percent are from their own unions. Nineteen percent of the *dalals* are from the upazila of the migrants and another 28 percent are from the same district. Only eight percent of the *dalals* are from other districts.

Some of the *dalals* have been performing the function for more than 40 years. A few claimed to have facilitated migration of 60,000 workers. A close study of *dalals*' profile informs that before engaging in the business of brokerage they

were involved in other businesses. As much as 70 percent were migrant themselves. A substantial majority of them did not have a farming background. Therefore, *dalals* have a longstanding relationship with migrants and their families as well as with RAs and informal recruiters of destination.

In the past, *dalals* may have gone door to door to recruit workers, but now in most instances it is the aspirant migrants or members of their families who come to the *dalals* for their service to secure overseas employment. *Dalals* employ a range of methods to link migrants with overseas employment: They contact RAs, RAs contact them, and *dalals* also look for circulars of RAs. Left behind family members of migrants also contact *dalals* to help them with the work visa that their migrant members had sent. It seems an element of trust exists between the migrants and *dalals*. Migrants feel if any problem arises then they will be able to seek redress through mobilising support from the local community against the *dalal*.

This research study on recruitment at the grassroots (RMMRU 2017) also conducted a door-to-door survey of 5,400 households in two upazilas of the district where *dalals* were interviewed. It revealed that 40 percent of those households were migrant households. Through interview of members of those households the study located a range of functions that are required to undertake migration that currently remains invisible in any policy or official documents or for that matter in any research documents.

Information on why, where and how to migrate is an essential part of any migration decision. Nowadays, NGOs, and to some extent migrant activist groups, provide information on regular paths of migration. Nonetheless, these information campaigns are only limited to some pockets of the country. More importantly, knowing about the regular path of migration has nothing to do with information on specific

jobs. NGOs do not have information on jobs.

As of now *dalals* are the most important source of migration information on opportunities of real jobs. The RMMRU study (2017) found that 57 percent of migrants first received information on the job from the *dalals*. Nineteen percent themselves had knowledge about some specific jobs through their links with people in the destination. Twelve percent received information from relatives and friends in Bangladesh and another nine percent

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received information from immediate family members. Seventy-eight percent of migrant households availed overseas work visas through *dalals*. What is more revealing is that 90 percent of the migrants or members of their families have paid the full or partial cost of migration to

the *dalals*. This indicates that it does not matter from whom the migrant receives information on jobs or procures visa—he or she will have to avail the services of *dalals* to process migration.

Along with direct services of availing jobs, *dalals* offer a wide range of personalised services that many poor, not-so-educated migrants require at every step of the otherwise complicated migration process. These include online registration with the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), information on availability of training or assistance in skills test, final-stage interviews with RAs, accompanying migrants to Dhaka, facilitating medical tests, etc. Therefore, it is evident that the demonisation of *dalals* is not in conformity with the reality.

*Dalals' rendering of services in helping migrants navigate through the maze of rules, regulations and institutions does not mean that dalals are innocent of committing frauds. Many a time migrants experience fraud. Frauds are committed both in Bangladesh as well as in the countries of destination. Incidents of fraudulence are higher at the destination. Besides, a section of migrants are cheated more than once.*

Migrant and migrant households mostly identified *dalals*, employers, friends and relatives as the perpetrators of fraud and cheating. Fifty-two percent of them identified *dalals* as cheaters, 34 percent identified employers, and 10 percent identified friends and relatives residing both in Bangladesh and in the destination country. Because of their limited involvement in the recruitment process, the RAs hardly come on the radar of migrants as cheaters. Only around one percent migrant households identified RAs as cheaters. The role of intermediaries in the countries of destination also does not surface in this research study as the migrants hardly have any knowledge about their involvement. That does not mean that all these parties are free of the crime of committing fraud with migrants.

It is evident that *dalals* bear all the blame of cheating in the recruitment process. However, the experience of fraud in reality is linked with the overall system of recruitment. Gaps in the law, inability of RAs to source workers from the grassroots, involvement of *dalals* outside the legal purview, the distorted system of procuring visa from the countries of destination, slow process of decentralisation of state institutions, all contribute to such incidents of fraud. The 2013 Act and the Rules framed as well as policy of the government do not provide any space to the *dalals* to operate. This has created conditions for the *dalals*, RAs, medical centres and members of the GCC Approved Medical Centres' Association (GAMCA) to commit fraud and blame one other and thus avoid responsibility.

To make both *dalals* and the RAs accountable and transparent, I strongly believe the need for recognition of the role and functions of *dalals*. This would require amendment to the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013. Since it is a new law, at this stage, such amendment may not be forthcoming. However, efforts can be made to innovatively accommodate the functions of *dalals* in the rules that are being framed to implement the law. A new vision is required to look at migration governance problems from the other side of the tunnel. That is why we suggest working on developing a long-term action plan that encompasses all relevant governance issues including regularisation of *dalals* and the adoption of 'Migration Vision 2030' in line with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

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