

## **Skill Development Challenges of Bangladesh and Korea's Economic Emancipation: A Comparative Study**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to investigate the current growth challenges of Bangladesh and also the success strategies of Republic of Korea in transforming itself from poverty to prosperity. Another purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how Korean growth experience can act as a guiding force for Bangladesh, one of the least developed countries in the world, striving to earn the status of a middle income country by 2021. Throughout the paper the researchers identify key challenges that Bangladesh faces from the beginning of a planning to execution of effective skills development strategies. The paper figures out one of the key enabling factors, innovative government intervention in skills development strategy, which led to Korea's miraculous economic transition. Utilizing mostly qualitative research methodology the comparative study discusses the dramatic significance of skilled labour in Korean economic transition and how Bangladesh can be benefited from Korea's sustainable growth take-off.*

**Keywords:** Korea; Bangladesh; skills development; economic development.

### **Introduction**

The scholars of development studies often come across a common query: why do some countries fail while others succeed despite having the similar socio-economic environment? Another is: can developing nations change their fortune without following conventional method of development? The central theme of this paper revolves around these queries followed with special focus on Korea's innovation driven economy and the lessons Bangladesh should take into account to prosper economically. The paper aims to investigate both growth challenges and success strategies of Republic of Korea in transforming itself from poverty to prosperity. Another objective of the paper is to examine how Korean growth experience can act as a guiding force for Bangladesh, one of the least developed countries in

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the world, striving to earn the status of a middle income country by 2021. Korea achieved rapid economic development over the last six decades at various levels and dimensions which can be a role model for any developing economies like Bangladesh.

In the last six decades South Korea has risen like phoenix from the ashes and become one of the Asian Dragons. Korea sets an example for developing countries how striving for excellence and determination can change a nation's fortune. During the four decades following the Korean War, Korea evolved from one of the poorest states in the region to one of the most dynamic industrial super-power that has virtually eradicated poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy (Choong-yong, 2010). In the late 1960's family owned industrial conglomerates known as chaebols received extensive government sponsored schemes that built the foundation of Korea's exponential economic growth. Government provided both physical and human capital to chaebols which helped them grow rapidly (Ra & Shim, 2009).

### **Korea's Combat against Growth Challenges**

South Korea faced massive growth challenges in its early stage of industrialization like other developing countries economy. Korean government played an important role in facing those challenges. The then government's active role in promoting rapid industrial growth by utilizing both physical and human capital can be exemplary for any developing country.

At the time of rapid industrialization in early 1970's workforce mobility increased at an alarming rate in Korea. Enterprises preferred practicing free-riding and poaching of workers. Chaebols preferred to hire workers trained by other industries. This poaching of workers reduced chaebols' excess training cost (Ra & Shim, 2009). This is one of the major reasons for which small and medium enterprises (SME) did not prefer to invest in training as trained workers would be enticed by big companies or chaebols. Even workers preferred to work for the chaebols because of their lucrative offers. This caused inefficient resource allocation and also reduced the number of workers with specialized training (Ra & Shim, 2009). To overcome this problem, Korea adopted government-led skills development system to increase the supply of skilled workforce. In addition, government intervention was needed for the development of the future workforce to meet the upcoming demand of rapidly growing diversified industries.

Another major challenge faced by the government was that a massive unskilled workforce began to migrate from rural to urban areas (Ra & Shim, 2009). The resulting differences in employment rates and skill levels among the national workforce were significant and were reflected in individual productivity and wage disparities. To redress the inequality in employment

and income distribution, the government enhanced job opportunities and productivity through training provision (Ra& Shim, 2009).

Where every other developing country faces hard time in handling its unskilled workforce the government-led training program acted as a panacea to surplus unskilled Korean labour market. Training opportunities were provided to an annual influx of up to 400,000 unskilled rural youth which also met the demand of the skilled workforce during Korea's high growth stage in the 1970s-1980s (Suh, 2002). Moreover, Korean government's decision to invest huge amount of money in human capital served the nation during the time of Asian financial and economic crisis in the late 1990's. Korean government found another rationale for intervening in the skills development market. It saved the underprivileged people from the harshness of the economic downturn and ever increasing degree of competition in the market economy (Ra& Shim, 2009). Hence, this government-led training and skills development system contributed to meet increasing skills demand at the initial stage of Korean economic miracle. It transformed mass unskilled youth to a skilled workforce through vocational education and training (Shim, 1997). As a result, International Labour organization (ILO) marked Korean government-led education and vocational training policy as one of the core for its rapid industrial growth (ILO, 2008).

### **Bangladesh Skills Development Scenario**

Bangladesh has the world's eighth-largest population with more than 160 million people. Even though in recent years' population growth has been reduced significantly, Bangladesh is still struggling to manage its huge population. Agriculture used to be the main occupation which eventually became unable to provide adequate remunerations to people. Therefore, Bangladesh is now trying to diversify its economy by prioritizing industrial development. Moreover, many Bangladeshis prefer overseas employment which is becoming one of the main sources of the country's foreign reserve. So, a huge demand for technically skilled workforce is at hand.

Government and other development partners are working together to come up with an effective manpower planning that can serve the country's demand for skilled workforce. Bangladesh government is currently emphasizing on vocational training and education system to prepare its large work pool for this competitive market. According to Bangladesh Vocational Training and Education Board's (BTEB) report, there are 27 different courses offered in 5149 institutions with an enrollment capacity of 4,56,614 students. They are offering diploma courses on technical education, vocational education, engineering, textile engineering, fish culture, agriculture, jute technology, forestry, health technology, medical ultrasound, commerce, animal health and production for 1 year to 4 years duration.

They are also offering some certificate courses for 6 months to 2 years duration (BTEB, 2011).

Bangladesh government is now working with its development partners to transform its people into human resources. It's working with developing partners like International Labour Organization (ILO), World Bank, USAID, Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA) and so on. Bangladesh government is trying to cope with frequently changing determinants of competitive market. In order to make vocational training available to every vulnerable group of population, Bangladesh government introduced Nation Skills Development Policy (NSDP).

As per the policy, technical and vocational training courses are introduced at secondary and higher secondary level education including madrassas. To expand technical and vocational education, the government is planning to set up one technical school in each *upazila*. An engineering college has been set up in Barisal district. Moreover, 2 women's polytechnic institutes in Barisal and Sylhet districts and 10 polytechnic institutes in other districts are being set up. 11 modern language training institutes have been set up in six divisions of Bangladesh to teach English, Arabic, Korean and Malay languages for doctors, nurses and job seeking unemployed youths of Bangladesh. The former Dhaka Textile College has been transformed into Bangladesh Textile University to cater to the needs of skilled manpower in the booming garments sector (Bangladesh Ministry of Labour, 2011)

In addition to these, in collaboration with International Labour Organization (ILO) and European Union (EU) Bangladesh government has taken an initiative named 'Skills Vision: 2016' with the aim to transform unemployed youth into dynamic and skilled manpower. Human resource development is an integral part of development agenda. Effective vocational training and education system can transform this huge population into an efficient workforce. Under this program development partners will be focused on 18 visions to bring radical changes in Bangladesh's human resource development condition. All these measures can bring a significant change in Bangladesh skills development scenario.

### **Current Growth Challenges of Bangladesh**

#### ***Lack of Planning & Synchronization***

In Bangladesh there is a lack of synchronization in the entire technical and vocational education system. Even though government is investing a lot of money on human resource development, but it is not bringing any significant changes. Most of these training programs are focused to serve external job market. The number of migrant workers increased significantly since the beginning in 1976 from 6,078 to 409,253 in 2013. But the number of skilled migrant workers remains nominal. But only 4% of them are

considered as professionals and 33% as skilled ones. Other 63% of them are considered as semi-skilled and less-skilled ones. As overseas job market is highly competitive so this large semi-skilled and unskilled work group can deteriorate market reputation for Bangladeshi workers. Adding to this, country's training courses have not received foreign accreditation and professional degrees remain unrecognized (Bureau of Manpower, 2013).

So, even though there are numerous vocational training institutes in Bangladesh, the quality of education they are providing is not widely accepted. Un-authorized vocational training institutes provide below standard education and poor rural people often gets trapped by such deceitful offers. As students are learning technical skills, it is essential for them to have experiences about real working environment. But there is no strong training culture in Bangladesh. Apprenticeship opportunities are pretty uncommon here. There are no such mandatory government rules that can force industries to provide internship opportunities.

#### ***Lack of Pre-Service & In-Service Training Facilities***

Most of the industries are reluctant about providing pre-service or in-service training facilities. They consider this as wastage of money and time. Such culture affects the overall effectiveness of the entire skills development approach. Hence, most of the immigrant workers went abroad without having any specialized skills. So, their job performances remain poor and they often suffer from downsizing and wage disparities. In this scenario, government intervention is highly recommended, so that government can set a standard and ensure that all the institutions are providing same qualities of vocational training. Additionally, government should come up with some incentive plans like tax exemptions and subsidies to encourage industries for creating training opportunities. This will not only ensure the acceptability of the courses to the foreign market but also increase our labours' efficiency.

#### ***Alarming rate of Unskilled Madrassa Students***

According to Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI, 2011) from primary to post-graduate levels, there are about 37,000 madrassas in the country, with a total of 3,340,800 students. However, Qaumi madrassas, in particular, are flooded with problems, including an outdated curriculum for which madrassa graduates are unable to gain employment as easily as graduates of regular schools. So, over the years a substantial number of potential work pool remained unskilled and inefficient. Some of them went to middle-east countries to work as labourers without any training or work experiences. Those workers were often sent back to Bangladesh due to their poor job performances. After coming back, these inexperienced workers could not find any suitable job in Bangladesh. Consequently, many of them are often manipulated to be involved in terrorist activities. It's high time now and

government should seriously consider a massive reformation of madrassa education. Bangladesh government has already included some vocational training facilities for madrassa students. As these students have fluency in Arabic language, government should plan to train them in those institutes targeting the middle –eastern job market.

### **Learning from Korean Growth Experience**

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries of the world. It's still struggling to manage this population explosion. Bangladesh is trying to find out effective ways to fight back the vicious cycle of poverty. With an extremely dense population it's becoming more and more difficult for Bangladesh to implement any development scheme. Like many other developing countries, Bangladesh often suffers from fluctuating economic conditions due to socio-political instability. Thereby, to maintain a sound macro-economic condition government should intervene in the skills development system to meet the future demand of skilled workforce of the growing industries. South Korea has already set an example on how manpower planning can transform a country's entire economic scenario. Korea's extensive vocational and skills development policy served the nation's rising demand for skilled workforce in its early stage of industrialization.

In Korea's initial stage of industrialization in 60's government considered vocational training as public good and introduced government-led skills development policy to protect the rights of vulnerable populations. Bangladesh government should take lessons from Korea's skills development experience. Government can plan to facilitate technical and vocational education to the least developed areas of the country. According to Bangladesh ministry of Finance (2011) government took an initiative to build a vocational training institute in every upazila.

### ***Feasible Skills Development Approach***

Korea first adopted the skills development system in 1967 by an enactment of the Vocational Training Act to provide a skilled workforce for industrialization. Since then, Korea has successfully aligned the skills development policy with the different stages of economic development and met skills demands by continuously improving the skills development system. The skills development system complemented the economic cycles of the Korean economy—from supplying skilled workers for export-oriented light industries in the 1960s and early 1970s, heavy and chemical industries in the 1970s and 1980s and technically more advanced and knowledge based industries in the 1990s and 2000s (Ra & Shim, 2009).

After 1997's Asian financial crisis the government shifted the emphasis of the skills development policy from supporting economic growth towards reduction in poverty and inequality and creation of employment opportunities. The government concentrated on securing training

opportunities for the disadvantaged groups, such as, the unemployed, non-regular workers, the aged, females, the under-educated, and SME workers, in order to reduce relative poverty and social polarization.

### ***Active State Transition***

Korea shows exemplary practices of government-led skills development. According to Ra & Shim (2009) The Government of Korea initiated a development strategy based on two premises. First, the government selected core industries (e.g., the light or heavy chemical industry) to be developed. Second, the government should examine the existing training capacity of employers, and when it found the then-existing capacity was deemed insufficient to meet the scaled-up needs for skilled and technical manpower, the government supported employers to carry out enterprise training or directly train the workforce needed. It's a milestone for Korea's skills development approach. Adopting such policy government ensures sustainability for enterprises in the global market. For any developing countries like Bangladesh Korea sets an example of how a balanced intervention by the governing bodies can take private industries to the next level.

For those less developed countries with a low educational attainment and a weak industrial base, an emphasis should be placed on basic education rather than early vocational education and training. Once basic education is well established, a vocational education and training system would be more effective and efficient in supplying a skilled workforce (Ra & Shim, 2009). Bangladesh is currently having a surplus of graduates at tertiary level. These large numbers of potential work pool remain unemployed due to lack of proper training. Bangladesh government should introduce vocational training facilities for those potential workforces.

### ***Emphasize on Research Activities***

Continuous research activities can bring significant change to any economic condition. Korea invested a lot of money on research activities to find out the most effective way of resource allocation and planning. Usually developing countries avoid research activities because of its high costs. Korea developed a qualifications system together with the vocational training system during its industrialization period. At first, the qualifications system was designed to increase the credibility of the training programs among employers and the general public, as supported by the Vocational Training Act of 1967. The government launched various types of evaluation systems like regional survey, nationwide survey and panel survey with an aim of understanding the actual impact of the taken skills development policies over the job market (Ra & Shim, 2009).

Additionally, the government supported various research institutes to carry out panel survey studies as follows. Korean Labor and Income Panel

Study (Korea Labor Research Institute: KLI), Workplace Panel Survey (KLI), Youth Panel (KLI), Korean Education and Employment Panel (Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training: KRIVET), Human Capital Corporate Panel (KRIVET), Graduates Occupational Mobility Survey (Korea Employment Information Service). These labour market research institutes not only carried out the survey studies, but also conducted evaluation of efficiency or effectiveness of training programs as an input to their policy development studies (Ra & Shim, 2009). Such extensive research-oriented evaluation system ensured maximum output from skills development policies.

During its rapid period of industrialization Korea faced an urge to focus on utilizing new talents who can bring innovation to chaebols. In order to that, major recruitment of college students was done by campus visits, company tours and pre-employment internships. They sent executives - alumni of the universities - with company brochures to attract new talent pool. Providing future graduates with opportunities to tour various companies or plant facilities was another effective measure. The tour used to work as an eye-opening experience for many students which helped them to understand the real working environment (Lee, 1998). Bangladesh government should adopt such strategies. Collaboration with academicians and entrepreneurs can bring significant changes in skills development process. Government should take initiative in establishing research institutes for forming and evaluating skill development programs, forecasting industrial development trend and also measuring the current labour market condition of the country.

#### ***Adopting Integrated Approach with Academicians***

Korea worked along with fellow academicians and scholars to figure out the most effective way of human resource utilization. As demand for highly efficient workers increased, companies requested professors of some elite Korean universities to choose their best students. Professors started to recommend those students who were most suitable for the chaebols. Chaebols offered widespread pre-employment opportunities as well. Moreover, chaebols like Samsung, Daewoo, and LG began to conduct research projects in collaboration with the universities. They were also financing scholarship funds and other development projects of universities (Lee, 1998). Although this whole practice was quite unusual for a struggling economy, it helped Korea in the long run in terms of achieving sustainability and competitive advantages over others.

#### ***Target Frontier Market***

Choosing a suitable target market is an important technique of survival in today's competitive market. Geographically Korea is surrounded by China



and Japan; two economic giants. From industrial point of view, it was very difficult for Korea to establish its brands in the global market because of international recognition of Chinese and Japanese brands. So, Korea chose to focus on the untapped markets to export their products. Korea decided to export their products in frontier markets like Cambodia and Lithuania. “Koreans are Asia’s most adventurous frontier market investors right now”, says Douglas Clayton (cited in Minder 2008).

Bangladesh can learn a lot from the strategies adopted by Korea. Geographically it’s surrounded by the ultimate south-east Asian economic giant India. Hence, in order to establish Bangladeshi brands in the global market conglomerates must search for frontier markets. Government should support one of the leading conglomerates of Bangladesh called Walton adopted this strategy and decided to target frontier markets. The Walton products hold a significant volume of share in local market and are also exported to different countries of the world like the United Arab Emirates, Myanmar, Sudan, Qatar and so on. Walton is taking preparation to enter other international markets like Australia, South Africa, Singapore, Poland, Romania, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Yemen, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Nepal and Bhutan in near future (Walton, 2014).

### ***Collaboration with Chaebols***

Government must constantly keep an eye on training institutes’ performance to ensure maximum quality of education. Feedback from organizations about latest skill trends and demands will help to achieve sustainability and earn competitive advantage over others. Korean government constantly worked with chaebols like Samsung, Hyundai, and LG to identify what type of skills required for their future growth and then worked with the training institutions to change curricula. This three dimensional work strategy built a synchronized skills development strategy (Tzannatos & Johnes, 1997). Bangladesh should also follow the path.

### ***Tackling Alarming Urban Influx Rate***

Bangladesh has got an alarming urban influx rate. Around 6.6 million unskilled people moved to Dhaka, the country’s capital city from rural areas with a hope to change their fortune (EkusherRaat 2014). This huge migration is creating a massive chaos in the city. Unskilled people are suffering from wage disparities and are deprived of basic civil rights. Most of them work as day laborers and earn very minimal amount and live miserably in slums. Bangladesh government can play a significant role like Korean government by training these socially underprivileged groups of the population. Government can learn from Korea’s similar growth challenge experience and improve job opportunities for these people through government-led training facilities and reduce annual urban influx.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Korea's innovative and sustainable manpower planning has become exemplary for any developing economy like Bangladesh. Where other developing country considers training as an extra unnecessary cost, Korea showed why investing in human capital is an inevitable part of achieving sustainable economic transition. Thereby, skills development, a fundamental aspect of policy development cannot be overlooked if Bangladesh hopes to change its fortune to a developed country and attain sustainable economic development. Another key point to remember is that Korean economic transition often referred to as miracle; this miracle did not occur overnight. Instead, the concept of innovation and integrated approach was reinstated in every phase of the country's economic development. The entire nation fought back with extreme dedication and determination for the last six decades to make this miracle happen. A developing economy like Bangladesh can be highly inspired by the popular miracle on the Han River. Indeed, in today's competitive global environment it is high time we thought about Bangladesh should adopt good governance, prioritize sustainability in administrative, industrial, and human capital development.

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