

Whether I Get Fully Recovered and Can Work Like Others Haunts Me All the Time: Experience of Being a Foreign Student Worker Abroad

Bojindra Prasad Tulachan
Gangseo University, Seoul, South Korea

The purpose of this research is to examine undermined or unnoticed episode of healthcare issue and financial benefits of students in the event of work-related accident abroad, especially of students from developing and least-developed countries. The article cites an account of Lokesh Singh (a pseudonym), a university student worker in X city of South Korea and its outskirts. Lokesh's account reveals that he was compelled to do sort of work for making tuition fees and living expenses. In so doing, he held an accident that broke his right hand at multiple places. Most importantly, there lacked timely healthcare facility and financial support in the event of work-related accident, especially in lack of legal contract between both the employer and the worker.

Keywords: gig economy, health care, precarious employment, student worker, South Korea

Introduction

This *On the Front-Line* article projects the unexplored story of Lokesh revealed on 20 August 2021 about his study and working experience in South Korea (henceforth Korea), at a time. Many of the student workers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America were asked whether they would continue working as university student workers any longer. Many of them responded as graduation would be the benchmark for them; at least they are university student workers for managing their tuition fees and accommodation. Most of them reported that they were from so-so economic background and their families cannot afford tuition fees for every next semester. Therefore, they must find work in the labor market of Korea. Thus, the objective of this article is to investigate struggles and stigma negotiations of university student workers from sociological point of view. Of them, the author finds a very interesting story of Lokesh being the university student worker and thus recruits him in this research project. On that account, the author follows up Lokesh and tape-records the account of his life as the university student worker in Korea. The story was transcribed and edited by the author in developing this research article.

Firstly, foreign university students are a growing concern in the developed and recently developed countries in that most of the students from developing countries are fulfilling 3Ds work. Most of the developed countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are the major destinations, whereas Japan and Korea in Asia are on the go to have student workers from developing, least developed countries. This is because of the increased unemployment in the home country and for career enhancement abroad, at the same time. In debate of whether

the student work is regarded in the mainstream work literatures, the account of Lokesh would add something for further studies in this domain, creating sub-domain of student work. This is because the student work is limited to part time job; some limited hours of work as per the university rules while studying in the university.

Secondly, it has something to do in neoliberal economic context (Tulachan, 2020; Tulachan & Felver, 2019; Baccaro & Howell, 2011; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013) as how new generations are hesitant to 3Ds work in the advanced and newly advanced economies and foreign student workers there fill the gap in the labor market. The domestic workers are more towards safe side, whereas the foreign workers, i.e., foreign student workers are inclined towards such job in these countries to meet the gap in the labor market. In that, the neoliberal governments pressure the individuals to find jobs, update, increase network and such a kind themselves (Gill, 2010). Here, it is exemplified as how Lokesh finds job with limited network with limited knowledge of Korean language in a foreign land and why he is recruited in a machinery work in the factory despite the fact that he has lack of know-how knowledge and of the Korean language. He compromises on working hours, pay, working conditions, and even minimum wages, letting employers a room for freeriding. It becomes kind of compulsion to work not abided by work laws and work ethics.

Thirdly, with the increased precarious employment (Simpson & Smith, 2019; Rodriguez-Modroño, 2019), the article seeks its place in the literature of precarious employment. Lokesh held into precarity of employment both in terms of risk and short-term based work. The vacation is for complete two months and three weeks were already gone. He has to do any sort of work that came handy for about remaining five weeks, at least to manage his tuition fees for the next semester. This makes him work any place, any work, any amount of money, and any schedule of work. Therefore, the account of Lokesh has some meaning as how university student worker is also the victim of increased precarious employment across the globe. For him, everyday counts. To that end, getting job is really, really difficult as all the foreign students are in the labor market for the same purpose as that of Lokesh's.

In the digital age, the development of social networks has assisted a lot to connect people from various social backgrounds. The cheapest calls of Viber, Emo, Messenger, Kakao, WhatsApp, etc., have contributed a lot to communicating with people around in network or out of network. With this, a message in-boxed adds great value to get to the job destination and holds hopefulness of getting the job, to an extent. The same thing is applied in Lokesh's case as he regularly follows his colleagues, who are already on the job, and also he finds stronger and weaker networks to find the job and makes repeated requests with voice way down. He acknowledges that being polite makes sense, finding the job in the labor market. In such highly increased gig economy (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Tulachan & Rai, 2020; Burtch, Carnahan, & Greenwood, 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2019), the account of Lokesh makes meaning, substantially as how a university student gets through in finding the job, especially during vacation period.

The post-Fordist culture motivates to work just for money for whatever work it is, which is beyond one's like or love to work (Sandoval, 2018). It is not always the case that people would like to work what they love, interested in, or can work, simply with their existing knowledge and muscles. Thus, this adds to the literatures of post-Fordist culture and beyond that. The Lokesh's episode reveals that people work when they think they are mentally and physically able to get into that work. He is young, strong, and smart, mentally to do that job. Then he decides to work in the company for his needs. Once you enter with such a mindset and start working, you cannot exit immediately for some other reasons. Entry could be little easier to exit when there are constraints and barriers of the working environment as it is not easy finding job immediately after one closes the door of the

earlier one. He has to struggle a lot in getting a new job. Also, there would be less belief and negative message among the networks that the guy is unable to work, so would be the case if they send him to some other places.

Most importantly, healthcare and financial benefits in the event of work-related accidents account great deal from the account of Lokesh's episode. As obvious there are number of reasons behind work accident (Alali, Abdel Wahab, Van Hecke, & Braeckman, 2016). Of many of the factors, job insecurity and long hours of work are the one (Gonçalves & Dias, 2011). Seemingly, workers with some health problems such as depression, diabetes, and chronic heart disease do have higher rate of accidents compared to none of these conditions (Kubo et al., 2014). Some of the earlier studies reveal that works that demand mental and physical stress are also prone to accidents (Julia, Catalina-Romero, Calvo-Bonacho, & Benavides, 2013). Workers with lack of experience for the particular job have higher risk of accidents than those with experience (Bena & Giraudo, 2013; Bena, Giraudo, Leombruni, & Costa, 2013). A foreign worker lacking language ability for communication could be another factor for hazardous accidents. On the other, workers with no formal contracts regarding financial benefits in the event of work-related accidents get in dilemma. Most of the countries do have system of financial benefits in the event of work-related events like in the Netherlands (Koning & Lindeboom, 2015). Mostly, workers within the standard employment system get financial benefits, whereas those with non-standard employment system get lower benefits (Chłoń-Domińczak, Sowa, & Topińska, 2017) or even no financial benefits at all. Thus, the paper concentrates on issue of healthcare and financial benefits of non-standard foreign workers in the event of work-related accident (as they do not have any legal contract paper).

Thus, Lokesh's overall account asks further debate and discourse, which makes sense in the sub-discipline of student worker literatures. In that, just ignoring the increased foreign student workers in the developed and recently developed countries and their contribution in the gig economy would be to neglect the new dynamics of work in the mainstream work literatures. Rather than simply keeping students in their own country and making them in the home universities for better human resources, it would be better if we ask the real foreign student workers. To this ground, the account of Lokesh deserves worth mentioning as the representative episode of most foreign student workers from developing and least developed countries towards advanced and lately advanced countries in the world.

An Account of Lokesh as a University Student Worker

Initial Aspiration

Basically, I had tuition classes and taught Mathematics in school, college. It means I worked as a teacher in Nepal.

Primarily, I decided to leave the country because of the increasing trend of students going abroad after the completion of their certain level of studies. It was not bad in Nepal for me. But those who were abroad posted photos in social Medias. Seeing that, I was excited to explore new places, cultures and learn new things. Additionally, I would have good income. Life was smooth.

After I had been here, I could notice wide road, tall buildings, and clean surroundings. Most interesting thing that touched me is that English is very important. We used all the applications in English. But here all the applications were in Korean language. Wherever I went, I found use of their own language. Not all people can speak English..., but quite systematic country. Everything is possible with its own language. The most important thing here is the access to public transportation. You can get it from 6 am early morning to late night 11, 12 pm... almost no need to have private vehicles here.

New place, new country I worked very hard in the same manner in the first semester and had burden of homework. I studied quite hard despite the fact that I had two days of class... comparatively less than in Nepal. I did my best and at the same time I could experience different presentations and explore research dynamics to an extent. Anyway, I studied very hard and went to work during vacation.

Vacation

We had been trying for part time job from the beginning. We got early morning at 6 am and reached nearby city, two hours from our residence. There the agent took us to different companies like fish company, shoe company, wine company, etc. We collected some amount of money for pocket money, food, and room rent. After vacation, I had pressure to pay for tuition fee for the next semester. I waited and looked for work here and there. I found work in another city. I along with two other friends got ready to go to that place. We reached there and checked the nature of work. It was not bad. We were provided accommodation as well. As usual there was pressure at work in Korea; my friends decided not to work after one or two days. They were not satisfied with their behaviors; they dehumanized, pressured... not good, third class. I convinced them that we must work as we should pay tuition fees for the next semester. It would be useless if we get back room. It would be late to get another work as the next semester will begin after two months. Thus, I convinced them to work again. Unfortunately, on the fifth day, my hands got into the roller and my right hand got broken at two places: one at the upper arm and the other at the wrist. I wept and cried. (In such situation in Nepal, we do have emotions. They have sympathy, empathy for such people and take them to hospital.) The person whether he was the manager or not I did not know exactly. Anyway, he was an in-charge, probably head of us, and got angry on me, instead. I had pain and was crying. I did not know whether it was my arm or not. I was unable to lift my hand. I was just crying saying "Mummy, Mummy". I was almost about to faint. Suddenly, I got back to consciousness and controlled myself. I was alert that I must go to hospital at any cost. I used my left hand to get a cell phone from my pocket and made a call to my roommate younger brother. He was asleep. It was almost 12 pm/1 am night time. He did not receive my call. It was day-and-night-shift and it happened on the first night shift for me. I called one of my friends who were there for work in the same company. Luckily, he received my call and told him about my broken hand. He came with other workers. They were scared of. They thought the hands were cut off. It took 15-20 minutes in between. The ambulance was called by a person from the company. I was kept in the ambulance. I was not able to move the hand. The medical person (could be Health Assistant) tried to fix my hand with a bandage, but he was not able to fix it properly. My hand was in such a situation to get touched. However, he partly fixed it and took me to a hospital. My friends could see me in the ambulance going to hospital. After I reached the hospital, (it could be of strictness or culture here; if it was in Nepal, they would keep patients like me in wheel chair and take me from one place to the other), I was not provided any pain killer. They took me for x-ray with a force. It was painful. They might have thought that the pain killer might have an effect on the hand. After the x-ray, the doctor told me that the hand was broken at two places. I stayed that day in the hospital. The doctor told me to have operation the next day. I was scared that the hand would be okay. I further came to know that the vein in hand had been stretched. The broken bone would get okay; the vein was in its extension. In general, it gets fine; but they said they cannot say exactly in this case. I was afraid that the hand could be removed. I wanted to have operation as soon as possible. On the day of operation, the owner of the company came to the hospital. They had a talk and decided not to have operation there. (It could be financial issue or the government would keep the company at risk zone. There could be so many stuffs around; I did not know about that, exactly.)

I met the doctor and was pressing him to make operation as early as possible. They escaped from it and they said they would not have operation in this hospital. Then, they took me to a hospital in Seoul. I had told about it to my roommate brother and he informed Church Father and Mother about me. We had good relationship with Father and Mother of a Church from the beginning. They loved us. Despite being a Hindu, I occasionally went to church; they used to call us (whatever religion... I respect Buddhism; I respect Hinduism; I have visited Masjid; I do not care). They reached the hospital. The hand was swollen; pain was still there. However, I felt little comfortable by the time. I used the plaster for a broken hand and was moving around. The discussion was going on for blood test, x-ray, and operation. I felt something went wrong. I did not feel comfortable for surgery. The Mother went on for further discussion. I did not acknowledge language, fully. She insisted that the patient has to get the treatment at any cost. She was angry at them. I was scared that the doctor would cut off my hand for money's sake. Finally, the employer said that I could have treatment in my own way and he would pay for it. I came back to city, where I reside. Then, I went to a university hospital for treatment. There, serious cases such as those hands were cut off were given priority (Mine was serious, though. They checked my hand and asked me to wait for a week. Meanwhile, my roommate contacted an American professor; he informed the college representative. Then, he called me as what happened and came immediately (though it was night time). I did not want to wait for a week. He further managed to have treatment in another hospital, where one of my university hospital doctors worked in that hospital. The hospital started re-checkup and the next day I had my surgery (anyhow I had to have my surgery sooner.) On the fourth day of my accident, I had my surgery and was happy on the day. I was quite comfortable after the surgery.

I had standby around 5,500,000 KW in my bank account that I had collected from two of my friends from the company and my roommates. Initial charge was around 6,000,000 KW which I had to pay. Luckily, Father managed that amount of money. He collected it from people he knew from Samsung and others. And then we talked with the employer about the treatment. His intention was not to go for treatment and said "no" to treatment. I had to have treatment of my hand at any cost. I had my money standby. Our college coordinator knew about the industrial accident act policy. The government had managed special insurance for the foreigners. He filled up the form and I had to do nothing further. I was provided basic salary, treatment, and money for meals. Then, it got easy because of the special insurance policy brought by the government for foreigners. I really appreciate that.

Second Semester

I continued my treatment. For four-five months, I could not move my hand. Meanwhile, the doctor wanted to stop the insurance policy. I told him that I cannot work and please do not close my insurance policy. He did not agree on it. Then, I talked with Father and Mother as there were no other people I knew here. They talked with the doctor but the doctor got angry at them. Insurance policy for a month got extended, though. I was not able lift and work anymore. There were other two Nepalese in the same hospital and their insurance was extended as they had hired a lawyer. I did not have a lawyer and even I did not know I should have a lawyer in such a case. The doctor got angry and did not behave me well. He threw some bad words on me as well. However, I continued the treatment with the same doctor in the same hospital. Maybe he felt I did not follow what he asked for. I was not able to move my hand properly. I had my accident in January of 2019 and it has been about one and half years at this time of interview. I am having an exercise daily. Even I cannot make weight lift and move window panes. I was not in a situation to change a doctor and had no idea of changing a doctor. Second semester had

started. I had no such tension as I had got scholarship for the semester. I was fundamentally worried about my hand as I was even not able to move my fingers even after four-five months of my accident. The college coordinator asked me to quit the semester and have a rest. Then you could continue the next semester. I did not want to quit the semester; I wanted to do it as early as possible. An American professor encouraged me that I can do it by your left hand. I had to meet the professors in advance while selecting the subjects because if I did not write anything how I would be upgraded in the next semester. So I had to meet the foreign professors and Korean professors said: "If you cannot write, you should be regular to class and we will grade, accordingly". But one of the Korean professors of Statistics said: "If you cannot write, I cannot upgrade you". This really pinched me that he should have considered in such a situation, at least. Slowly and gradually, I could move my hand and could write at the end of the semester. I got good result, anyway. Things went alright.

Third Semester

I did not get any work until mid-third semester. I was not able to work properly. After that I got the job in a mobile shop. I knew I had to type in a computer. I was scared of that if they asked me to work on computer, I was sure I would not get that job because I was not able to move my right hand, fingers and I could hardly write. There was an issue of work permit and difficult for students to make the permit for work. So I was not offered the job. Later, I was offered the job from the same place. Almost I did the same job for two-three months and the semester completed. From the next semester, my job got stable. I got good result in this semester as well.

Fourth Semester

I had my daughter with me in the fourth semester. COVID-19 appeared in Korea. Also, my aunt was sick and wanted to meet her. As I reached Nepal, COVID-19 appeared in Nepal as well. Problem appeared again in the fourth semester. The international flights were cancelled. No way to be here. Classes were about to start. Meanwhile, temporary online classes started and I emailed to the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) office that I would have online classes. I knew the coordinator well and he cooperated well. He suggested me to quit the semester as it would be difficult to upgrade as you have got four classes. I did not like quitting the classes as I had never made a semester gap in Nepal before. So I insisted that I would not quit the classes even though I fail the exam. He said: "If you say so it's okay. It's your personal decision". Luckily, there were online classes throughout the semester. Before the final exam, I had a special chartered flight, though expensive. There was one face-to-face exam for statistics; others were online exams. I faced difficulties due to online classes as I was mostly trained offline classes. I did all my assignments; however, I could not present myself better for professors. As a matter of fact, I could not get good results so far my expectation.

What Next?

Everyone looks for career in the world. The main thing when I left Nepal was that I would have experience, study and get back to Nepal. I should think of career. I cannot do anything right now in Nepal. It's really difficult time now; COVID-19 is all around. I will further go for two-three years or more as I have completed Master's degree here. I am thinking of staying here. It's hard to go to other places either. I will look for better career for my wife and daughter. Thus, I continue to stay here in future.

Future Research

Recent contested terrain whether student workers are to be included in the mainstream work literature is on the go. Lokesh's account of being the university student worker projects increased precarious and competitive

self-employment relations in the neo-liberal, gig economic terrain. The episode raises the issue of healthcare and financial benefits for student workers in the event of work-related accidents and that further links to distinctions from mainstream work literatures within the frame of gig economy. Therefore, the researchers are asked to have further empirical research for the validation of this research.

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