

INTRODUCTION: CANADA 150 CONFERENCE ON MIGRATION OF BENGALIS

1. BACKGROUND

The Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis was triggered by our academic as well as personal desires to establish broadly the history of migration of Bengalis¹ or *Bangla*-speaking people to Canada. As long-time researchers on Asian immigrants in Canada, and through our involvement in the Metropolis Research Project, we realized that there was hardly any published material on Canadian Bengalis. Therefore, in 2017, on the eve of Canada's 150th anniversary, we took the opportunity to celebrate and document the history and contemporary trends of Bengali immigrants in Canada.

Migration of the streams of Bengalis (those who speak *Bangla* as their native language) to Canada happens mainly from two sources: Bangladesh and West Bengal² (India). As will become evident from essays in these conference proceedings, Bengalis have been settling in Canada since at least the 1950s. However, no statistics on Bengali migration to Canada are available even today, because Statistic Canada counts Bengalis under the "South Asian" category, which includes many ethnic and linguistic groups and nationalities. Early migration of Bengalis to Canada in the 1950s was largely from West Bengal. Migration of Bengalis from Bangladesh began following the devastating war and independence of Bangladesh in 1971. In recent years, many Bengalis, particularly from Bangladesh, have made their homes in Canada in major cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver. Of late, Vancouver, British Columbia has become a major destination for Bengali immigrants as it is a major entry point from Asia.

A key objective of the conference was to document the history and settlement patterns of Bengalis in Canada and their contributions, particularly as regards the Bengalis in British Columbia. As we find today, the Bengalis from West Bengal are typically doctors, engineers, professors, IT experts, teachers, and so on. Many of them have been living in the Greater Vancouver area for over 40 years. They are professionals and thus, according to

¹ This term is an anglicized version of *Bangla* used during the British rule, which continues even today. Those who speak *Bangla* as their mother tongue are known as Bengalis.

² In August 2016, the West Bengal Legislative Assembly passed a resolution changing the name of West Bengal to "Bangal" in Hindi, "Bengal" in English, and "Bangla" in Bengali.

Canada Immigration and Citizenship (CIC), skilled/economic immigrants. On the other hand, Bengalis from Bangladesh work in diverse professional and service sectors – as engineers, doctors, professors, taxi drivers, chefs, healthcare workers, frontline service providers, small business owners (e.g., ethnic shops/business), and so on – although most of them enter Canada as skilled/economic immigrants.

Despite differences in their nationalities and origins, Bengali as a language binds these two immigrant groups together. They get together for various social and cultural events, and often jointly host and collaborate in celebrating major events, such as the Tagore festival and International Mother Language Day (IMLD), which was promoted by Bangladeshis living in Vancouver and officially proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1999 to respect and preserve minority languages, including the languages of the Indigenous/First Nations people of Canada. In Vancouver, the Bengalis from Bangladesh and those from West Bengal have their own associations – for example, the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association (GVBCA) and the Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Association (LMBCA).

2. THE CONFERENCE

The two-day (16-17 September 2017) Conference on Migration of Bengalis to Canada/British Columbia was held at Simon Fraser University (SFU) Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver and the University of British Columbia (UBC) main campus. Day 1 (16 September 2017) of the conference was held at SFU Harbour Centre. The program included a keynote speech by a guest speaker from Ontario and presentation of papers by invited speakers.³ Day 2 (17 September 2017) at the UBC Institute of Asian Research began with a keynote speech by a guest speaker from Manitoba, but was largely focused on presentations by second generation Canadian Bengalis. Further, two round table forums were held in the afternoon, where community practitioners, service providers, frontline workers, community leaders, and community members spoke and narrated their experience as immigrants, including opportunities and difficulties encountered in their settlement process. The conference was free of charge and open to the public so that greater community participation could be achieved.

The conference brought together a large number of speakers, participants, and attendees who debated the history of Bengali migration, projected future growth and potential of Canadian Bengalis' settlement in Canada, and shared knowledge as well as personal and collective experiences. The Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies (GSWS)/SFU, and the Centre for India and South Asia Research (CISAR)/UBC jointly sponsored the conference, which was conducted in English, and as a result, it attracted academics, researchers, graduate students, and participants interested in migration/immigration studies. Due to the nature of the topic, the conference was attended not only by Bengali-speaking people living in BC's Lower Mainland and on Vancouver

³The full Conference Program can be found in Appendix 2.

Island, but also by Bengali-speaking scholars from the Ottawa Capital Region, Ontario, as well as Manitoba and Saskatchewan. In total, there were more than 160 participants.

The conference was organized around presentations and panels that allowed opportunities for all participants to engage in lively discussions; many shared their personal stories related to migration experience, and discussed the associated social and political contexts and the challenges of adjusting to a new life in Canada. The conference was thus a key platform for growing networks of professionals, scholars, researchers, artists, community members, and others interested in issues pertinent to migration and settlement patterns in Canada. It also facilitated a deeper perspective to look beneath the surface of settlement programs and to learn from the diversity of experiences that participants brought to the conference. Feedback from the conference was very encouraging; participants greatly enjoyed the opportunity to interact with like-minded people, and the chance to network, explore ideas, and learn from each other. Looking back, it seems impossible to summarize the enriching thoughts that were shared over these two days.

3. DAY 1 AT SFU HARBOUR CENTRE

The program for Day 1 began with a short welcoming speech by the conference organizers along with due acknowledgement that the conference was taking place on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. This was followed by opening remarks by Jane Pulkingham, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, SFU. In her remarks, Dean Pulkingham acknowledged the significant role universities and academia play in listening to what communities can reveal about the diversity of experiences in Canada. She further noted that the Social Sciences and Humanities play a particularly important role, as they can provide insights into the root causes of migration as well as the cultural, historical, economic, and social barriers to integration.

The Day 1 program consisted of four sessions. Session I was chaired by Lara Campbell, Chair of the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies (GSWS)/SFU, who introduced the keynote speaker, Tania Das Gupta of York University. In her speech, Das Gupta addressed the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of migration to Canada, the reality of political, legal, social, and economic mechanisms, and how racialized immigrant communities, and in particular Canadian Bengalis, have become the targets in internal and external disputes about national identity. Through her research-based lecture, Das Gupta demonstrated how the Canadian Bengali community experiences xenophobia that is frequently downplayed and sometimes denied by the Canadian state and society. Racism and xenophobia are distinct phenomena, although they often overlap. While racism generally implies distinction based on difference in physical features, such as skin colour, xenophobia is rooted in the perception that the other is alien or originates from outside the mainstream community or Canadian nation. The session continued with an interactive and fascinating discussion in question and answer (Q&A) format on how Bengali community members see themselves as Canadians as well as how they mobilize collectively toward a common identity and share manifestations of common ancestry upon migration to Canada. Das Gupta's speech sparked a vibrant debate around the official and popular self-

understandings of the Canadian Bengali community as a particular historical, cultural, multi/mono-ethnic, and multi/mono-linguistic as well as multi/mono-national identity. These concepts stand in contradiction to the oppressive policies and practices that exclude or subordinate Bengali ethnic identities, culture, language, tradition, religious faith, and national origin.

Session II started with an opening statement by session-chair John Harris, Professor of the School of International Studies/SFU. Bidisha Ray provided an historical account with respect to transnational migration, which was very thought-provoking. Ray recounted the earliest wave of migration from the British-ruled Indian province of Bengal. The Bengalis were considered to be the original inhabitants of the Bengal region in British India. Despite the fact that the Bengalis have been historically classified as “Indian” or “East Pakistani” as their national identities, the Bengali culture in its rich and diverse way created other cultural/sub-cultural distinctions. In her presentation based on her oral history and interviews of elders in the community, Supriya Bhattacharyya provided a review of the history of Bengali migration to British Columbia from West Bengal. According to her data, professionals were the first to migrate to Canada in the 1960s. Some came to Canada for university education and later stayed and made Canada their home and created a vibrant cultural community in British Columbia. Culturally, Bengalis are indeed attached to their language, and are active in national celebrations and festivals. Narrating her story, Khaleda Banu shared her own experience of migration and settlement that demonstrated intersecting magnitudes of space, age, gender, family, motherhood, parenthood, race, and class. What stood out most was the way in which she highlighted the changes that took place in her life, discussed the roles of power, privilege, and oppression, and responded to the loss of homeland, class, and network without falling into a victimhood mentality. Sanzida Habib addressed the ways in which Bengali immigrant women’s health is related to their lived experiences in Canada. With particular attention to breast and cervical cancer screening, Habib suggested that in addition to factors such as age, length of stay in Canada, professional skills, and education status, systemic barriers including socio-economic hardship, unemployment, and racism play a vital role in regard to women’s access to healthcare services. The Q&A section highlighted the main points raised during Session II. The floor was opened up to the participants, who raised a number of points, including the fact that we now find ourselves in a new situation – one that is characterized by the need to rethink the meaning of nationalism, long distance nationalism, settlement, resettlement, and integration. Making reference to the idea that migration could be seen as peoples’ dreams and ambitions for their future, another participant suggested that community integration is not just about legislation, but also comes along with the building of relationships, trust, and understanding.

Session III was chaired by Charles Greenberg of Capilano University. Four papers were presented. In her paper, Sarika Bose explored the roles of Bengali immigrants’ transnationalism and identities in shaping their settlement and integration experience. Bose pointed out that Bengali-Canadian identity was not adequately theorized in the available literature. By challenging homogenizing tendencies related to people of Bengali descent in Canada, Bose examined how Bengali-Canadian immigrant identities are formed. She acknowledged that similarities and differences among Bengalis in Canada regarding their ongoing quest for identity required that additional nuance and profundity be added to the discussion. In his presentation, Tareq Islam provided an engaging narrative about the

socio-cultural dimensions of adaptation as an immigrant student. While many theories could provide suitable frameworks for examining these, Tareq Islam's story revealed that symbolic interactionism could provide an additional valuable framework for exploring the intersections of cultural script, construction of meaning, identities, and the social adaptation of immigrants. Tareq Islam directed attention to how the loss of familiar cultural values and norms as well as the demand to integrate into the new society impacted post-immigration social adaptation, relating how he continued to strive to define an authentic "self" within his new life here in Canada. Marina Hossain's life story showcased how young people can thrive in school, at work, and in the new society despite the many obstacles they encounter. Drawing on her own experience, Marina provided the audience with a positive and engaging view of the kinds of support and resources she received, including peer networks, and strong bonds with her family, friends, and co-workers. Sharing his experience of living in Canada, Mustafa Chowdhury deftly illustrated the difference between identity (how we see ourselves) and identification (how we are perceived by others). The processes of identification and the construction of social identities became a central point in his speech. Chowdhury highlighted the sociocultural dynamics that are significant to racialized migrants by addressing the following questions: What kinds of social ties are constructed and maintained through the processes of transnational migration? Whom do these social networks include and exclude? What kinds of social identities are maintained through these networks? These questions were also addressed by critically examining institutionalized racism surrounding national and political associations.

Session IV was chaired by Bidisha Ray. Ranjan Datta's presentation demonstrated how Indigenous communities could control environmental programs through wisdom and sharing of knowledge. Datta further illustrated why land-based education is essential in creating a sustainable environment for all, and the ways in which we could advance Indigenous rights and culture with particular focus on the social, political, cultural, and environmental impacts of colonization. Iqbal Bhuiyan's paper focused on recognition of credentials and licensing in engineering, which is a highly regulated profession in Canada. Professional licenses are issued by licensing boards, and the criteria for licensing are fairly strict. Further, the costs and time related to licensing pose a significant challenge to many internationally trained engineers, resulting in unemployment and underemployment of this group of highly skilled immigrants. However, Bhuiyan offered a range of job search strategies that foreign-trained professionals could utilize to secure employment and economic stability. In their paper, Mohammad Aminul Islam and Mohammad Zaman displayed the significance of honouring mother languages in relation to peace, harmony, and multiculturalism, and explained how language plays an important role in developing and preserving cultural heritage, cultural traditions, and solidarity based on understanding and dialogue. The paper provided the background and history leading up to the recognition of International Mother Language Day in 1999 by UNESCO. Sanzida Habib and Hafizul Islam made a presentation on the history and activities of the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association (GVBCA) and how it is promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in BC. Finally, Chinmoy Banerjee, in his personal narrative, presented a unique approach to critically analyzing the internal and external conflicts over identity with particular attention to discourses of migration, migrant experiences, and racialized bodies, as well as history and politics of difference. What stood out the most for the audience was the way he

offered a platform to understand the relationship among multiple conflicting racial and national identities.

4. DAY 2 AT THE INSTITUTE OF ASIAN RESEARCH/UBC

Day 2 of the conference was held at UBC. Manakranta Bose, former Director of the Centre for India and South Asia Research (CISAR) and Professor Emeritus, UBC, welcomed the participants and acknowledged that the conference was being held on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Musqueam First Nation upon which UBC stands. She underscored the fact that this was the first ever conference on Bengali Migration to Canada and its importance in establishing Bengali-Canadian identity for all Bengalis in Canada.

Day 2 at UBC started with Session V chaired by Mohammad Zaman, who introduced the keynote speaker, Emdad Haque. In his speech, Haque focused on how Bengali migration and diaspora fit into the process of nation building in Canada and particularly in Manitoba. Bengali immigrants remain one of the fastest growing diaspora communities in Manitoba. He noted that Canada enjoys a diverse regional identity – including English-Canadian identity, French-Canadian identity, and Indigenous identity. Thus, immigrants' identity is also as diverse. The session continued with an enthusiastic discussion about rethinking ethnic, regional, and national identity. Haque's presentation provided a set of questions that he wanted to answer: Who are Bengalis in Canada? How have these Bengalis changed over time? How do these Bengalis differ from others? What differences exist among the Bengalis in Canada?

Session VI was dedicated to second-generation Canadian Bengalis and their identity and experience at home and beyond. Fariha Khondaker reported her own experiences as well as those of many other young women of the Bengali community in her narrative related to how the youth and second-generation Canadians of the Bengali community are struggling to reconcile their families' cultural practices with life in Canada. Khondaker described how young women like her are in the middle of a complex relationship with Canadian society, their parents, and their community. How do they deal with cultural practices to keep the balance between being independent and at the same time carrying responsibilities and expectations of unquestioning respect to family and community? Bidushy Rahman presented a thoughtful examination of the integration of Bengali youth and the complex interactions between community, language, and Bengali identity. She cited many examples of how second-generation Canadian Bengalis are reconciling their Bengali cultural roots with their lives as Canadians. For instance, they have become increasingly active participants in cultural activities, including even bigger spectacles than those that take place at their point of origin. In many cases, they achieve a stronger level of equivalence between their Canadian and cultural roots at every level – economic, professional, cultural, and linguistic – to build on rather than differentiate themselves from Canadian experience and identity. Drawing on his own experience, Maz Haque noted that although settling in a new country may feel overwhelming for adults, the struggles of children are often unnoticed. Youth face tremendous challenges related to the differences between their cultural background and the new society into which they are trying to integrate. This might create complicated situations. Parents often focus heavily on high academic achievement, and do not realize that their children are struggling socially.

Academic prosperity is obviously essential, but it is not the only factor in terms of success or quality of life in Canada. Rafia Mahzaben explored aspects of Islamic identities in multicultural Canada, arguing that Muslims, and in particular Muslim female youths, face unique challenges. They come from diverse racial, linguistic, ethnic, and national backgrounds, and their experiences of Islamic practices take place in a different setting. These diverse experiences may result in fragmentation or even conflict within their own community and Canadian society as whole. Habiba Zaman moderated the discussion that followed Session VI. Zaman underscored the need for trust and flexibility to understand the needs and struggles of youth at the family and community level. It is further noted that since second-generation Canadian Bengalis are future leaders of Canada, they need to understand how to sustain and transform their integration with respect to the added value of Bengali culture as well as Canadian values.

In addition to the six sessions, the conference organizers conducted two round table discussions with community members, leaders, and frontline workers. The discussion pointed out that prior to the Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis, there was no recorded history of Bengali migration and settlement in British Columbia. The common themes in the discussions ranged from identity, to discrimination and struggles including lack of proper accreditation and under-employment/unemployment, to barriers to becoming part of mainstream Canadian society and culture. Some coping strategies and ways out were also discussed within the context of multiculturalism, community activism, and social justice.

The conference provided a great opportunity for academic interaction and networking among participants. As the first of its kind, the conference and its proceedings will remain an invaluable source of ideas and references for those seeking to understand the history of Bengali migration in Canada. Finally, we want to express our gratitude to all participants, particularly speakers, moderators, and volunteers.

