

DAY 1: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2017

Opening Remarks:

Jane Pulkingham

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JANE PULKINGHAM

OPENING REMARKS

Hello and good morning to you all.

I welcome you all to the Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis to Canada. As the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, I welcome all participants, including the invited speakers from York University, the University of Manitoba, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Victoria, and the Ottawa Capital Region. I am pleased to inform you that six units of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences have sponsored this conference. These include the Departments of Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies; History; Sociology and Anthropology; Humanities; and International Studies; and the David Lam Centre. In addition, the Dean's Office has also funded the conference due to its significance in view of the Canada 150 celebration.

I understand this conference is the first ever effort to document the history, settlement patterns, and contributions of Bengali migrants in Canada. Bengalis are the seventh largest linguistic group in the world, consisting largely of *Bangla*-speaking people from Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. In Canada, unfortunately, the Census as well as academic researchers generally lump this linguistic and cultural group under one umbrella category: South Asians. Consequently, the presence and contributions of Bengalis in Canada are not visible or easily recognized.

One of the most significant markers and contributions of Bengalis in Canada – particularly in BC – is International Mother Language Day (IMLD). A group of Bengalis in Surrey, under the banner of the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS), initiated a move with the UN/UNESCO to establish the 21st of February as IMLD, to commemorate those who lost their lives to protect *Bangla* language and rights in 1952 in Dhaka, in what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). UNESCO declared IMLD in 1999 to preserve all languages, including those Indigenous languages under threat of extinction (and we have many in this province of British Columbia), and honour the rights of all people to speak and use their mother tongues. Since then, IMLD has turned into a global event calling for new awareness about linguistic rights and awareness globally. This unique contribution by Bengalis has thus strengthened our Canadian multicultural and linguistic diversity and rights.

The migration of Bengalis to Canada happened largely due to the removal of the racist immigration policies of Canada. The Immigration Act of 1976 removed racial discrimination and established a universal points system regardless of racial or geographic origin. This points system prioritized education, training, and occupational skills for selection and admission of immigrants. Consequently, Bengalis, especially those educated, trained, and skilled in their country of origin, began to migrate to Canada in the 1980s.

However, the documentation of their migration, settlement patterns, and contributions is limited. Thus, this conference will to some extent fill the gaps in the immigration literature in Canada. The publication of the Conference Proceedings in hard copy and their digitization through SFU Library will leave a footprint for this generation and the next generation of Canadians who are keen to investigate their ancestry. The conference is also expected to encourage Canadian Bengali youths to foster relationships with wider Canadian society irrespective of language, religion, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and country of origin.

Again, I welcome you all to this important meeting of Bengalis in Canada. Enjoy the weekend here in our beautiful British Columbia!