

SARIKA BOSE

“MULTI-CULTURAL”: STRADDLING CONTINENTS,
STRADDLING IDENTITIES

This paper will attempt to unpack the meanings of identity in the context of culture and belonging in more than one place. My experience of what life means in India and in Canada is absolutely personal and therefore limited; in the words of Stuart Hall (1990), what I will say “is always ‘in context,’ *positioned*” (222). The limits of those experiences formed me, and the accident of my experiences is hardly likely to provide a fair or representative experience. My account of my life and identity is subjective, because it is framed by memory. As French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004: 7) noted,

The constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images...affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory. And yet...And yet we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it.

Thus, Ricoeur (2004) asks us to accept that memory is a valid path towards the search for truth (55).

In *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur (1965/1986) said, “Man is this plural and collective unity in which the unity of destination and the differences of destinies are to be understood through each other” (138). I wish to examine Bengali-Canadian identity partially through my own positioning within the Bengali immigrant community and in contrast with other Bengali immigrants I have met, and partially through comparisons with dual/immigrant identities in other immigrant groups, whether in Canada or in other countries. In this paper, “Bengali” refers to those who come from India rather than from Bangladesh. The Bengali community that I have known in Vancouver is diverse, so for the sake of clarity, I have divided it into groups of graduate students, recent permanent residents or immigrants (arriving within the last 10 years), and long-term immigrants. I have also aimed to chart a short account of my experiences with these communities. This is neither a psychological, sociological, historical, cultural nor human geography study, though it may contain characteristics of all these; rather, it is mainly an attempt at auto-ethnography.

Despite a great deal of research on immigrant/diasporic experiences and multiculturalism by sociologists, cultural and social historians, and human geographers – such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Charles Taylor, Paul Gilroy, Arjun Appadurai, Alison Blunt, Judith M. Brown, Will Kymlicka, Harald Bauder, John Shields, Taniya Gupta and Sutama Ghosh, to name a few – there has been little scholarly work done on specifically Bengali immigrant experiences, particularly in British Columbia. In the larger society of Canada, there is little or no awareness of Bengali presence or culture; Ghosh, whose research is mainly on Toronto Bengalis, reminds us that any individual Indian culture group gets subsumed within the popular image of India as a colourful, exotic place. The

many multicultural festivals (such as the Diwali festival put on by the City of Vancouver) focus on Bollywood and other non-Bengali representations of India, ascribing a homogenous identity that produces “a ‘South Asian’ culture (Ghosh 2013: 38). Ghosh’s (2013) study finds that Toronto’s South Asian youths themselves consider Bollywood and Bhangra to be at the core of Indian culture; for many Bengalis, the spring festival of “dol” is now “holi,” and “Diwali” is celebrated instead of “Kali Puja.” In Vancouver, stereotyping is perpetuated even within the South Asian community, when Bengali women are represented as a static presence from the past, wearing a red-bordered white sari, and alta on their feet. This trivializing of Indian and Bengali identity results in a kind of “disappearing” of Bengali culture. Even within an active cultural association like the Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Association (LMBCS), younger community members often prefer performances of Bollywood and sometimes Punjabi music and dance styles, and attempts at maintaining any kind of distinct culture appear to be relegated to a nostalgic past (most commonly represented by Tagore). Some of my Bengali contemporaries who grew up in Canada frequently refer to their own ethnic cultural practices, especially connected to food, clothes and entertainment, not as Bengali, but as “desi” (roughly translated to “from one’s country”), a word that used to be identified only with non-Bengali Indian cultures. Charles Taylor (1994) points to the harm of both “non-recognition” and “misrecognition,” noting that multicultural theories argue that “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its *absence* [emphasis mine]” (23). Not being recognized can thus work towards erasing a significant component of the Bengali-Canadian’s identity. This paper hopes to add to the record of Bengali-Canadian experience in Canada.

Why do people move from one country to another, however accidentally, reluctantly or enthusiastically? In a study for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an Uzbek migrant to Russia explains simply: “If things were better there, I wouldn’t be here” (Keeley 2009: 36). International undergraduate students making a short film about their choice to come to Canada said that they were looking for “security and happiness” (Kaur 2017). Brian Keeley’s (2009) analysis of immigration patterns and narratives suggests that what drives people to move to another country is the “push” of economics and general state of things at home (macro-structures) and the “pull” of the new country’s economics, general situation and social networks (microstructures) (36).¹ The reasons for the Bengali migration to Vancouver are fairly standard: job transfers and education and/or employment opportunities for people and their children. Canada’s reputation as an open-minded society that accepts diverse lifestyles has also influenced the decision to move here. Unless they have been living in politically unstable countries outside India, Bengalis continue to choose Canada for the above reasons.²

Once in a country that is not the origin country, an individual is immediately transformed, at first superficially. Difference is constantly brought to the individual’s attention, both by others and by the individual him/herself. For example, there is a

¹ We will not be considering the meso-structures, which apply to recruiting agencies or illegal activities.

² Despite a significant jump in American and other international student applications to Canadian universities since the 2016 US election, as reported by the Government of Canada’s Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the data is too recent to be able to see an effect on the Bengali population in particular (see CIC News 2017).

tendency to respond to the new land through the framework of contrasts – “they do this, we do that” – and some individuals never overcome this kind of oppositional, and implicitly moral, framing of identity in which “we,” of course, would be superior. “They” become the lens through which to recognize self. Not surprisingly, children tend to make the shift much more quickly than adults, and whatever dissonance they feel tends to come from the ways in which their parents hold on to their culture of origin, than from their own experiences in India. For example, one Bengali child who came into the Vancouver school system felt she was in a paradise, because the pressure to study was so much less, and she was encouraged to develop more aspects of life than academics. When she had to return to India after a few years, her trauma really resonated with me, as I had had the same journey as a teenager, and had felt as traumatized. I was fortunate to be able to return after two years of high school in Kolkata; she was not.

External impositions of racial and cultural identity constitute the other piece of the transformation from the mono-national identity to the hybrid identity that I discuss below. According to Stuart Hall (1995: 8), it is inescapable:

Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition.

Toshio Takemoto (2015) confirms that the accidents of race and culture create a “social, rather than individual identity” (177). From a single national identity, one becomes two, and begins to enter Homi Bhabha’s (1994: 38) “third space,” which

may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the “inter” – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.

That in-between space can, for some, create a fragmented, confusing and ultimately diminishing structure in their lives, though for others, such as human geographers Sutama Ghosh and Lu Wang (2003), it can be a positive framework that is seen as an expansion of selfhood. A common narrative thread in many stories about growing up in more than one culture is that first or second generation youth feel torn between loyalty to their parents’ culture and attraction to the culture of the present country – the “burden of culture” is then deeply felt. Teenagers already find the process of developing towards adulthood difficult; the demands of double or triple cultural norms make the process even more challenging. In my own case, perhaps because my own parents did not insist on a Bengali-centred existence, there was no need to fight for a Canadian existence or identity. I was never stopped from listening to music I liked, or forbidden to socialize with or date non-South Asians.

Ghosh and Wang (2003) have written about the process of moving from a culturally homogenous identity to a hybrid one, from one to many selves, becoming the hybrid Canadian. Like many of my contemporaries from Kolkata, Ghosh was anxious to maintain her Bengali identity, particularly while far away. Her method of maintaining it was to wear “national dress,” eat Bengali food and listen to Bengali music. This way of retaining the origin culture within herself was private, however, and only occasionally displayed for others, such as at international student potlucks where students wore their national dress

and shared a dish from their countries. In contrast, Wang's response to the invitation to display identity through culture of origin was puzzlement, as she felt that in the modern world, any attempt to wear "national dress" would require her to look to historical models, rather than present practice. In this case, the international students were demanding a commitment to certain stereotypes to make identity readable to others. Looking back at their initial encounters with Canadian culture, Ghosh and Wang (2003: 276-277) write:

Both of us have metamorphosed over time into multiple, hyphenated selves, and the phase of transition from a "single" identity to "hybrid" identities is still continuing.... Upon reflection, we feel that we have created several hybrid identities and often switch positions between those hyphenated identities in accordance with the demands of the context (place and time).

A documentary by Samah Ali and Jenny Jay (2017), student film-makers at Western University, called *hyphen-nation*, which won an award from the Canadian Association of University Teachers in May 2017, speaks to this insistence on at least a *dual* identity in people of colour, by both observers and those who come to this identity experientially. A single or integrated identity does not seem to be an option for people who see physical difference as the most significant indicator of identity. The difference is, of course, between the "norm" and what is outside it. It is never "Canadian" first, but "Bengali-Canadian," "Indo-Canadian" and so on. This hyphenated label imagines identity in Canada as fragmented, as if a person cannot be whole if he or she looks different from what is still the implied "real" identity of the Canadian: a person of English/Scottish/Irish origin. Even Quebecers are called French-Canadians, and though that may be a way for them to claim the primacy of French culture and identity, it is still a label that makes the English-speaking Canadian of British origin the norm against which all other Canadian identities are measured.

The hyphenated identity seems to operate on the same terms as "mixed race," a space that has seen its own and separate share of scholarly attention. The vocabulary of that "mixed race" discourse can be usefully applied to the hyphenated identity as well. Again, the binary of belonging/not belonging becomes the framework; traditionally, the "mixed race" individual is seen as an outsider to all recognizable – i.e., homogenous – communities. From a point at which this "half-caste" is a repulsive figure who is an aberration, belonging nowhere and being almost unnameable (to influential writers like Kipling), "mixed race" has become "interracial," and, as David Parker and Miri Song have commented, ironically a marker of "inherent biological superiority" (Blunt 2005: 11). Within the Bengali community, the negative implications of this mixed race identity are imposed upon those Bengalis who are regarded as insufficiently committed to the performance of a Bengali identity. They perpetuate the practice within ethnic communities of using racial slurs to signal that community members don't meet their standards for ethnic identity, such as calling Chinese people in North America "bananas" and black people "oreos"; sometimes new Bengalis in Canada will call long-time settlers such as me "ice-cream bars" – chocolate on the outside and vanilla on the inside. What political philosopher Will Kymlicka (2001: 55) calls the importation of "illiberal ideas" attempts to replicate hierarchies, and the attempt to replicate values from "back home" can result in marginalization or full rejection of community members seen to violate them (e.g., divorced women). An intensive commitment to "Indian" identity through particular interpretations of religious practice can lead to conservative movements like the Hindutva movement (Lele 2003).

A common word used by both Indians and Canadians to describe me is “exotic.” It is another way to say I don’t belong where I happen to be. In “Constructing the Self in Megumu Sagisawa and Miri Yu’s Travelogues: A Case Study of Two Japan-Based Female Writers of Korean Origin,” Takemoto (2015) says that the idea of the “other country,” where I always belong in the eyes of my examiners, “is not an obvious natural category, but an arbitrary concept that serves to create a sense of belonging to one’s own country by means of contrast with the foreign” (175). Where I’m from – which inevitably seems to imply I don’t belong wherever I’m being encountered – is a question interminably asked when I go to India and when visitors come from India, and it is also a tedious commonplace when I encounter older Canadians, who patronizingly tell me that my English is very good. Jonathan Rutherford (1990) explains that once culture is commodified, what was once terrifying because of its alienness becomes an entertainment, a spectacle: “Otherness is sought after for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrills and adventures it can offer” (11). In this context, my interrogators are seeing exoticization as a positive action. To be fair, exoticization can go both ways. Especially in the 1970s, I saw how excited community members were to dress up the non-South Asian spouses of Bengalis in saris and kurtas, and how delighted to take on the roles of guides into Bengali cultures by translating what was happening at pujas and explaining what the food was. It allowed community members a path towards being recognized as having some kind of cultural authority.

The differentiating process continues through other categories of questioners. In an account by Amita Handa (2003), Handa speaks of the delicate negotiation that occurs in a conversation with a South-Asian taxi driver, as they both work towards acknowledging a common identity. She calls it the “uncle or auntie phenomenon” (11). Once the bond of cultural inheritance is established, the taxi driver assumes the identity of a benevolent community member looking out for the reputation and character of a younger member. In this case, the questioning has a different purpose and response from the person being questioned. Handa begins by explaining she has hailed a cab.

Though we begin chatting in English, by his accent I am immediately able to place him as someone from India or Pakistan, a speaker of Hindi, Urdu, or Punjabi. While at first we both avoid acknowledging and placing each other as part of the same collectivity, inevitably the conversation turns to “Where are you from?” This question does not carry the same weight or sting as the “Where are you from?” I receive so often from white Canadians. In this context, it is more of a ritualistic marking and mutual acknowledgement of something shared, a confirmation of inclusion rather than a disclaimer and verification that “you are not from here.” As the cab driver and I establish that our roots go back to a similar region, the style of our interaction changes. We no longer perform and construct ourselves around the rules and regulations of separation between driver and passenger specific to living in the West, and Canada in particular. At this point, I slip into Hindi, as a gesture that I have retained the language, which many have assumed I had lost. The language here becomes part of a shared text and in some ways allows certain kinds of conversations that usually do not happen in English. (Handa 2003: 12)

This incident is interesting in several ways. I find the term “inevitable” to frame the original question does not match my own attitudes. I am torn between needing to establish the connection and the need to be private and independent in my identity.

When I meet new people of Indian origin in Canada, or people who have newly arrived in Canada, they insist on asking probing questions until I just give up and answer their core question: where am I from? Yet the answers that follow this revelation appear to be a betrayal of my Indian origins, as I neither watch Bollywood movies nor know what the best Indian restaurants are. When Handa (2003) speaks with the taxi driver in the above conversation, she slips into Hindi “as a gesture that I have retained the language” (12). Why is it necessary to make such a gesture? There appears to be a desperate desire to be worthy of approval, even from a stranger; Handa’s ability to speak Hindi presumably signals a certain level of virtue only attainable by maintaining connections with her “real” country. As Handa recognizes, she constructs “a narrative and representation of self in relation to uncle that is congruent with racial and cultural loyalty” (13), with loyalty to the non-Canadian identity being the signifier of virtue. To her, the instinct is to cooperate with the stranger’s need to construct a particular narrative about her; not cooperating would brand her a “cultural renegade” (13). Stakes become high in an initially innocent encounter between two people – concepts like virtue and betrayal become the underpinnings of the symbolic relationship between them.

Bengalis’ skill at either learning the language of their parents or retaining their mother tongue in a foreign land is not commonly tested in a taxi driver scenario, but rather within social situations within the community. As in Handa’s (2003) case, this skill is praised if the language is spoken well, but the ability to speak as fluently as Bengalis in India and Bangladesh seems to be attached to underlying judgments of virtue. In other words, the approval granted to second- or third-generation Bengalis who can speak Bengali fluently implies a satisfactory commitment to and respect for their cultural origins. Second-generation Bengalis are often reluctant to speak Bengali, and if they do, it is spoken haltingly, with limited vocabulary and a strong Canadian accent. Their parents speak of their own decisions to guide their children towards mastery of English at the expense of being able to speak both languages. To them, the choice to move their children away from acquiring or retaining fluency in Bengali enables greater integration into Canadian society and thus broader opportunities. As I think of Handa’s experiences, I consider my own. In the script I follow in such conversations, if we can get on to what I do for a living, there is a great deal of pride and approval from these strangers, with some implying I have successfully infiltrated Canadian culture – teaching English to white folks!

Such questions speak to the uncertainty and unreadability of my identity in the eyes of others, and my status as a traveller of sorts, rather than a citizen of wherever I am. These questions are demanding access to an “authentic” self, one that is clearly not visible to them via my appearance in terms of dress, language or behaviour. The questions do not stop until I can offer a satisfactory commitment to one identity, or to one that is more X than Y. Thus, even though there is an insistence on dual identity by many non-South Asian Canadians (with racial identity clearly dominating under the guise of respectful cultural acknowledgment), there is more of an insistence on a mono-national identity connected with the country of origin within the South Asian community.

This kind of thinking appears to satisfy some need for ordering the world into readable pieces. One way to order one’s world and control one’s identity is to locate it in the home. Alison Blunt says that home is “a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two” (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 2-3). Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani and Seth Low’s (2003: 1073) summary of the concept of place identity explains that

The concept of place identity – the sense of belonging to emotionally, socially, and culturally significant places – is an important facet of people’s self-identity. Place identity situates psychological development in the life spaces, home spaces, neighbourhood spaces, and national/transnational/global spaces where people live and work. As a psychological construct, it highlights the significance of understanding residents’ conceptions of themselves as located in a particular space and time and as members of a social community and cultural group.

For Ghosh and Wang (2003), the significance of place is that it “has also made us more aware of ‘who we are’” (276). By making domestic spaces into markers of a national identity, Bengali immigrants announce and affirm their conceptions of themselves, as well as their social and community affiliations. It is not that there is any attempt at a faithful reproduction of a Bengali home in every detail. Yet – student housing or not – our homes in the 1970s were similar in their attempts to superimpose India onto the wall-to-wall shag carpet and wooden walls, often with reproductions of similar paintings, portraits of Tagore and generic objects (the brass peacock, the wooden dhol player). Though our home had (and continues to have) more books than others, most homes had at least a copy of the *Gitanjali*, even if they had nothing else. The organization of these homes created an “India in Canada” (Navarro-Tejero and Gupta 2013). Bengali homes of recent immigrants and students I have visited have greater variety than in the past, but signifiers of Bengali culture are certainly as present as in the homes of long-time Bengali settlers.

We hosted and attended dinner parties where everyone competed to provide large numbers of dishes. At the puja celebrations, community members got together and enthusiastically cooked for everyone. The most admired cooks continue to be those who can recreate at home the Bengali sweets that most people in Bengal buy in shops. Though Indian groceries that are readily available in supermarkets today required a trip to the other side of town for many of us, it was worth the effort. People ate mostly Bengali food at home, and even the children who preferred fried chicken and hamburgers seem to have grown up to be nostalgic about the Bengali food they ate when they were growing up. Food became the medium through which we could “signal collective identity, allowing us to express our affiliations,” and it also influenced “how others perceive us” (Koç, Soo and Liu 2015: 295). In his study of food practices within immigrant communities, Ajay Bailey (2016) adapts Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) concept of the 5 “scapes” of the cultural imaginary, adding “foodscapes” to describe the immigrant’s attempts to build community. Through our “immigrant foodscapes,” the Bengali community found and continues to find ways of belonging (Bailey 2016: 52).

The Bengali immigrant community tended to live its Bengali existence within private spaces of homes and the borrowed spaces in which the community could meet. We attended the pujas that the small Bengali community bravely organized in the face of the dominant non-Bengali Indo-Canadian cultures, despite having no dedicated space of their own. They made others’ temple spaces their own, however temporarily, yet the converted churches and other buildings clearly built for a different purpose would highlight the “foreignness” of Bengali community within them. In the 1970s, there was a great deal of community enthusiasm in working together to make a puja the best it could be, even if it was in a borrowed space. After a hiatus in that energetic involvement during the 1990s, a new wave of Bengali immigrants have injected excitement into the celebrations again, compelled perhaps by missing “home” more immediately than the long-time settlers and

the second generation. Even if the spaces are still borrowed, they are more heavily occupied by larger numbers of Bengali participants, and the spaces more successfully overlaid by Bengali cultural artifacts (e.g., décor by community members).

The core of the community was ethnicity, and the attendant assumptions about shared values and cultural tastes. It is not that members of the community stayed away from “Canadian” activities like camping and community barbecues (with tandoori chicken, rather than chicken with barbecue sauce), but that we did not take part as a community in the other kinds of activities we did in the university community. Today there have been some changes, as sometimes we see an organized attempt at acknowledging environmental responsibilities (with a signature line in every LMBCS email communication reminding us not to print out memos), or at taking part in charitable activities like volunteering at a food bank. When I speak with recent immigrants, I hear about some of the ways they have changed since coming to Canada: sometimes habits (e.g., of politeness to bus drivers) become values, while at other times, values become habits (e.g., volunteering for a charity). At other times, practical changes might include changes to meal times – though when asked, recent immigrants still feel more comfortable with the contemporary Bengali trend of eating very late (9pm or after).

Here, I would like to return to the idea of home as a set of values and actions, rather than a space, and to its connection with transformation towards a different way of being. For this, I will first have to travel backwards to the start of my own journey to Canada, as the significance of changing places is that it “has also made us more aware of ‘who we are’” (Ghosh and Wang 2003: 276). My own journey has taken me back and forth between three countries that have been of particular significance: India, Canada and England. Each crossing of the ocean has built the layers of my “place identity,” so that I experience my Canadian (primary) identity through the lens of both an insider and outsider.

Charles Taylor (1994) asks us to “consider what we mean by *identity*. It is who we are, ‘where we’re coming from’” (27). Taylor is not being as literal as the less sophisticated interrogators whom I have discussed already. Yet where we’re coming from and where we are going both lead to the idea of “home.” I will start with an answer to that literal question. Where am I “really” from? If place of birth is the only satisfactory answer, I will provide it. Born in Kolkata, I spent my childhood, until the age of ten, in Kolkata, Burdwan in West Bengal and briefly, Udaipur in Rajasthan.

In my moves from a small university town to a big city to a less dense city, I realized that wherever my home was, it had to be urban. I was brought up in a cultured and educated family that regularly went to “high culture” events, such as theatre, art exhibitions, poetry readings, classical dance performances and of course, Rabindrasangeet and dance performances choreographed to Tagore’s songs. All these events were formalized and contained within “culture” spaces specifically built for them, and I did not encounter Indian folk culture – of the sort replicated in Punjabi performances – until I was in Vancouver. Any Bengali “folk” dance or music was mediated through the interpretations of “high culture” artists like Tagore. Our 1960s Kolkata home was literally adapted to fit around books (my grandfather claimed we owned 12,000), and my memory of this home includes the bookshelves inserted into every nook, built above doors and along staircases and mezzanine floors. Having lived as students in England, my grandfather and parents were very familiar with various aspects of Western culture, including foods, literature and music, all of which we consumed regularly. My English language Catholic school also made

me fluent in English, so I had no problems adjusting to these aspects of Canadian life when I moved to Vancouver at the age of ten. The cold, the lack of uniforms and the complete lack of interest in cultural activities by my peers at school was another matter, and the focus on sports and outdoor activities – rather than an inability to speak or read the language – remain factors in the alienation from Canadian culture that still exists in me.

My progress and transformation into a child who nevertheless felt more comfortable in Canada than in India were not brought about, however, through the path of cultural consumption, even if I liked rock music more than Rabindrasangeet. My transformation was influenced by the university community in which we lived while my parents were graduate students at the University of British Columbia. Although my elementary and high schools were fairly homogenized so that I was very much a visible minority, the university community at home was very different.

The 1970s were still seeing the last of the hippie generation, which embraced diversity in culture and community, and their easygoing habits and activist attitudes modelled acceptance of difference. It was truly multicultural. I never felt exoticized or alienated in this particular community, as both children and parents simply forged relationships based on common interests and personalities; race as either a positive or negative component was not a significant aspect of conversation, though in hindsight, some of their actions were evidence of conscious attempts to create authentic relationships with people of other nations. John Shields and Harald Bauder (2015) note, “those Canadians with the strongest sense of nationalism are also the strongest supporters of immigration and see multiculturalism and diversity as a core defining feature of Canada” (24). Many of these neighbours were also activists who regularly went to demonstrations or protests, tried to make environmentally responsible choices, supported local farmers and so on. There were regular communal dinners, potlucks complete with folk singing and conversations around a fire afterwards. There were not many Bengali children of my age in Vancouver in these years, though there were some who were my younger brother’s age. Consequently, I didn’t have Bengali friends, and my closest friends came from the community in which I lived. Even when some when some Bengalis my age moved to Vancouver in my teenage years, physical distance and different temperaments kept us from forming close friendships. The university neighbours are still friends, and by now, we call ourselves an extended family. They were a great influence on my own ways of being Canadian, and with them I felt at home. In other words, it was when I was around people who were committed to certain ideals that I was at home.

Where I learned from my non-Bengali neighbours the value of acceptance and openness to different cultures and lifestyles, and a life that was firmly located in the present time and place, what I learned from the Bengali community was a need to hold on to a culture and identity that were not where we were. Canada prides itself on being multicultural, but if multiculturalism implies inclusiveness and respect for other cultures, this was not really practiced within the graduate student Bengali community, whose determination to hold on to and focus on an idea of how to perform Bengali identity tended towards isolationism, and continues to do so. Canada was just a place to occupy temporarily. Even though temporary commitment to space is inherent in the graduate student’s life, this sense of not belonging was amplified by cultural differences. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the Bengali community, whether within the immigrant or graduate student community, was not monolithic, and that there were

degrees of being “Bengali” within these communities. It is also important to acknowledge that the instinct to stay within closed communities as much as possible was also influenced by a very recent colonial past in which Indians and their non-Indian rulers were hyper-aware of racial difference, as well as by consistent identification of the Indian body as “other” in Canadian society at a time when Indo-Canadian culture was not as mainstream as it is today. The Bengali community of the 1970s was naturally different from the community today. To begin with, the size of the community has more than doubled, and advances in technology mean regular and immediate connections with “home” are possible in a way they were not before the 1990s. Instead of having to save up to pay \$10 for a minute or two of phone time with loved ones (which generally only allowed enough time to ask whether everyone was well), with the advent of cheap or free phone plans, newer immigrants can speak to loved ones every day for hours at a time. Somewhat more affordable flights allow people to fly to India more frequently; even students can often manage a return in the middle of doing their degrees. The connection with the community at “home” is thus not as fully located in nostalgia and the memory of a long gone India, but rather is grounded in contemporary life. Canadian media outlets and free websites provide access to Indian television stations. Indian news can be followed online in real time, and recent Bengali immigrants, more regularly than long-term immigrants, read Indian newspapers easily through the Internet. With the larger Bengali population, many recent immigrants can choose not to socialize outside the community; as some community members have said, not having to reach beyond the community for meaningful friendships makes life easier.

Building on Erin Tolley’s (2011) work, Shields and Bauder (2015: 15) suggest that the concept of integration includes the following:

- 1) [immigrants] identify with the receiving country rather than anchoring their identity in the country of origin;
- 2) participate with the institutions of broader society;
- 3) learn the official or dominant language(s) and communicate on an ongoing basis with it; and
- 4) build friendships and networks that extend beyond one’s ethno-specific group.

Certainly within the graduate student community there was a determined commitment not to where we were, but to where we were not, with attempts to replicate India in home and habits, and to convert the unfamiliar (such as vegetables) to the familiar (as British colonialists had done in India). More graduate students today expect to get jobs in North America and move here permanently, but also seek Bengalis for their primary community. Intimate relationships between Bengalis and non-South Asians are rare, because it is easier to socialize with Bengalis when there is a choice. When I read of the experiences of other North American Bengalis, I think of Jhumpa Lahiri’s (2008) words in an NPR interview, in which she spoke of having parents who didn’t mix with her friends’ parents, saying that there was “a fear, an unwillingness on both sides.”

Though decades have passed since I arrived in this country, the “us” and “them” narrative continues to perpetuate the separateness of Canadian and Bengali/South Asian lives in an existence that occupies Canada for its opportunities and modern conveniences, and appreciates it as a tourist might, for its scenic attractions. This way of responding to life in a new country is hardly unusual, but it was not my response, probably because my encounter with the culture began in childhood. I feel connected to the land itself, and feel a deep sense of belonging. When I speak to the other Bengali children of my or my brother’s

generation who were either born in Canada or who moved here and have lived here for most of their lives, they are certainly more distanced from Bengali culture than their parents are. I too have grown into this distance. I have not visited India in over 10 years, and I attend Bengali community and cultural events infrequently. This does not mean I do not value and respect Bengali culture or many of the values related to family and community support for each other. Values modeled by my parents and many family members, and by schoolteachers in Kolkata, whether Mothers Paul and Theresa and Sister Frances at Loreto House, or former Freedom Fighters like Mrs. Uma Shehenapush at Patha Bhawan, are foundational to my character. Yet where I belong is a question I answered for myself long ago: it is the globe. I feel now my deepest roots are in a country where I wasn't born, and the roots in the country of my birth are as fragile as the roots of annual herbs. This does not mean I'm fully detached from my birth roots, but simply that those roots are entwined with newer ones that have become stronger.

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