

## **ADAPTATION AND ACCEPTANCE IN CANADA: A STORY OF A STUDENT, IMMIGRANT, AND CITIZEN**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Let's start with a bit of the backdrop of my life. Growing up on three other continents – Asia, Europe, and Africa – I came to Canada as a foreign student to study Engineering at the University of New Brunswick. After my graduation in the mid-90s, I had a fantastic opportunity to remain in Canada through a temporary job offer. What follows next is history.

### **2. ASIA, EUROPE, AFRICA, AND THEN NORTH AMERICA**

The question of where I come from gets a bit convoluted. Both of my parents were originally from Bangladesh, but moved to Pakistan where my father worked as a geologist for the Government of Pakistan and my mother was a homemaker. I was born in Karachi, Pakistan along with my twin brother. We already had an older sister who was just a year older. When we were still infants, my father received a scholarship to enrol in a PhD program in Geochemistry at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. We all moved to the UK and remained there for the next four and a half years while my father completed his PhD. We then moved back to Pakistan, and then within six months we moved to Bangladesh. We remained in Dhaka, Bangladesh where my father initially worked as the Director of Geological Survey of Bangladesh and then took an academic position with the University of Dhaka. In the mid-1970's, my father joined Rajshahi University and we moved to that city in Bangladesh. In 1980, when I was in junior school in Rajshahi, we moved to Nigeria, as my father took a faculty position at the University of Maiduguri. After completing high school in Nigeria, I went back to Bangladesh for about a year and then moved back to Nigeria where I was enrolled in the Bachelor of Civil Engineering program. However, in 1989, after completing my first year, I had the opportunity to come to Canada as a foreign student and joined the Bachelor of Science in Engineering (BScE - Civil Engineering) program at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

### **3. THE BEGINNING**

Back in the days when I was a foreign student coming to Canada, we did not have the technology we have today, therefore I did not have the opportunity to see the campus ahead of time or comprehend how it would be to live and study there. I did not have any

prior knowledge of what a Canadian university campus would look like. However, it was really important for me to know what kind of living environment I was about to enter, and whether or not to live on campus wasn't the easiest decision to make. On-campus housing often varies widely, and can include dorms and upperclassmen houses. Most of the dorms at UNB were occupied by freshmen. This is probably true for most universities in Canada even now. I chose to live in the dorms for various reasons. One of main ones was that living in a dorm made it easier for me to integrate into campus life. It gave me an opportunity to meet and befriend other dorm residents. I was surrounded by people of my own age who were making the same adjustments to school and dealing with some of the same pressures I faced, even though the context was totally different. I knew that I would need to change so that I could adapt to this brand new environment. I was brought up in a different educational system which valued more strict and rigid guidelines for communication in an academic environment – especially with regards to student-teacher relationships – which did not apply to the more flexible and, to some extent, liberal methods in most contemporary educational institutes in the West. It was a totally different dynamic.

I want to talk a bit more about my early time in Fredericton. I believe that period of time was quite important for me in terms of defining the Canadian in me. The first year was somewhat tough for me. However, from my first day on campus, I was taken by surprise by how polite and welcoming people were. They acknowledged that I was from a different country and patiently helped me understand some of the nuances of things that had never occurred to me. I was surprised at how much comfort I received from people in my faculty and my dorm. I treasure the resources that I got from UNB. The teaching faculty on campus were extremely helpful, and the professors really devoted their time and effort to helping me succeed. Their interactions with me went beyond merely explaining the learning materials or going through teaching slides; they also offered me a great deal of advice, such as how to approach things in a professional manner. Additionally, I received a lot of help from the UNB International Student Advisor's Office as well as from the Dean of Students Office. The support I received made my transition to Canada easier; moreover, the kindness and unaffectedness I encountered in others are values I carried with me, and these values have definitely helped me become who I am today. Canadian values such as equal access to wellbeing and opportunities, civility and mutual respect, compassion, empathy and generosity of spirit, and multiculturalism and respect for diversity were perhaps the seeds that inspired me to consider Canada as my new home.

#### 4. MY PROFESSION

After my graduation in 1995, I worked briefly with the International Development Research Center in Ottawa on a project in Peru. After my project was completed, I worked with several consulting firms including Washburn & Gillis Associates Ltd. and The Civil Engineers Ltd. for a brief period of time. While in Canada, I applied for immigration under the independent immigrant category and immigrated to Canada in 1998. I joined Sperling Hansen Associates in North Vancouver in 1998, working as a Civil Engineer. In 2003, I took up a position as Manager of Solid Waste Management in the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen. I also worked there as the Acting Manager of Engineering Services in 2004. In October of 2004, an opportunity came along to join the Fraser Valley Regional District as

the Manager of Environmental Services & Operations. In December 2004, I also assumed the position of Acting Manager of Utilities. In 2006, I became the Director of Engineering, and after the restructuring of FVRD departments in 2011, I became the Director of Engineering and Community Services. I am presently employed with the Regional District in that same capacity. I'm a professional Engineer and a member of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of BC.

## 5. MY FAMILY

My family is an important part of my life in Canada. I married my soulmate Rezwana in Vancouver in 1999. She is originally from Bangladesh as well and I met her here in Vancouver. Our beloved son Ayman was born in Vancouver in 2001. We moved to Penticton in 2003 and then moved to Chilliwack in 2004, where we lived until 2013. We presently reside in Langley.

## 6. THE ESSENCE OF THE MULTICULTURALISM EXPERIENCE

My experience as a foreign student in Canada was ambivalent at first. When I arrived in Fredericton, New Brunswick, I was very enthusiastic about my new life. I was thrilled, firstly because it was my first time in Canada, and secondly because I was going to have an opportunity to live on my own, which is probably quite typical for that age. However, as reality set in, I initially found myself to be in an exacting situation as I struggled to adapt to this new way of life, including academic pressures (mainly due to unfamiliar educational methods), and cultural differences, especially living in a dormitory environment. In the dorms, I encountered a swirl of cultures along with diverging values and morals. I had fruitful encounters with Canadian and international students and listened to their stories about their lives and growing up in their hometowns and cities. I developed a deep appreciation for them. This brought about a profound sense of insight, and brought me closer to different points of view amid my own struggles. Along with the support I received from various sources, these experiences helped to elevate my spirit. I should mention that I did not suffer from a language barrier *per se*, but English is not my mother tongue and I grew up with various other languages as well. Initially, I didn't feel that living in Canada I could identify myself as multilingual apart from knowing both French and English. However, my feelings have changed over the years, knowing that multilingualism enables us to share real cultures of various places around the world including Canada.

Understanding a new culture that is different from mine has always enthralled me. I found that effective communication is one of the key factors in adapting to a new setting and gaining acceptance. In my experience, I found that in cross-cultural communication not everyone acts in a particular cultural display. I sense that most people want to understand each other and to succeed in communication and understanding. I see adaptation as just one of the tools to attain that.

I perceive that, in a general sense, to succeed in Canada as a newcomer it is essential to focus on improving communication skills. Yet, to me, those communication skills are not just about grammar and vocabulary. Effective communication goes beyond adapting to a

new language. It also involves recognizing that different world views and cultures come along with different perspectives, and that's where cross-cultural understanding and etiquette come into play. One encounters and is enriched through exposure to other languages and various forms of writing. This deep involvement questions our assumptions, confronts our biases, and challenges our ignorance.

As immigrants to Canada, it is ultimately the responsibility of all of us in the society to fit in and learn the ways that are accepted here, while at the same time teaching others about new values and ideas related to social and cultural impressions. The way I perceived settlement in Canada for myself, as an immigrant, was to adapt to the new culture while keeping the original one as my primary identity. If I didn't see it that way, I would have become alienated from both, since the original one has become too distant and the new one did not represent my identity.

I find that conversing about the cultural contrasts and dilemmas faced by immigrants are important, especially when focusing on newcomers coming to Canada who are planning on calling it their home. It is a situation to which most of us can relate, being either an international student like me who is considering staying in Canada given the opportunity, or a Canadian with a history of immigrant ancestors.

I am part of the fortunate minority of immigrants in the world who have the freedom to choose the place they want to live and work. Yet with that freedom came the decision as to where to set down my new roots. It is important to clarify that this decision was not a matter of one place being better than another, but of how well each place fit with my background and provided an atmosphere of multiculturalism where I could adapt and be accepted in my personal and business life. In terms of my personal life, I chose to stay close to my own Bangladeshi culture and uphold cross-cultural values including Bangladeshi tradition, language, and religion. In terms of my professional career, I chose to adapt more to the Canadian culture I found when I came to Canada, while at the same time sharing my cultural background with my colleagues and associates. I always felt and kept in mind that I am a new Canadian, and I needed to prove that I am an important part of this country. This impetus allowed me to work hard and get where I am today, particularly in terms of the development of my own leadership and motivational skills.

To me, like most immigrants, it is important to raise a family with some heritage and background of my country of origin. There is a difference between the way we grew up in Bangladesh and the way my son is growing up in Canada. Both cultures have some distinctions and drawbacks. Bangladeshi culture places more emphasis on norms, rituals, values, and traditions that are greatly inspired by cultures from the Indian subcontinent and Islamic religion (for Muslims). On the other hand, Canadian Western culture is quite open. Its norms, beliefs, values, traditions, customs, and practices are greatly inspired by European culture. Moreover, Western Culture includes British culture and French culture, and is greatly influenced by American culture. My family and I found that a balance of both was more acceptable for our son, and this works well with him. We mark most of the Bengali/Islamic cultural and religious celebrations with him. At the same time, we honor, celebrate, and participate in more mainstream Canadian traditions such as Thanksgiving, Halloween, and Christmas.

Over the past 28 years, I have learned a lot about Canada's Indigenous people, including their culture and their struggles in Canada. The learning is still ongoing. In my own professional life, I have had and continue to have the opportunity to work with First

Nations communities directly. This has given me the opportunity to understand and share cultural values and traditions as well as understand some gaps, cultural dissonances, and misconstructions which lead to intolerance and inequity. I think most of the time we associate multiculturalism in Canada with people of different cultures, customs, religions, and languages – not to mention the luscious cuisines of people who come from around the world to make Canada their home. However, when we think of Indigenous people, we often think of them as coming from one culture or a variation thereof. I think there is often a misconception that Indigenous people here have a homogeneous culture. In my personal experience working with various First Nations communities, I have found that – in this province alone – different nations have distinct differences in their cultures.

I personally believe that it is imperative to maintain Canadian identity as a world model of multiculturalism by openly and honestly embracing diversity and working together. This necessitates the recognition of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, and the acknowledgment of the freedom of all Canadians to preserve their cultural heritage. I think our actions must match our attitudes and our Charter, which call for justice, fairness, and social warmth. We must communicate these values by making multiculturalism not trivial but central to our national identity, striving for a cosmopolitan instead of a neo-colonial society, and never giving in to the fear and coercive persuasion of irrational politics.

