

BENGALI CANADIANS IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION: MAPPING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

PROFILES OF BANGLADESHI IMMIGRANTS IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION (NCR)

In the absence of a precise number of Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR, it is generally held that there might be at least five to seven thousand Bangladeshis, consisting of immigrants and their Canadian-born children.

1. COMMON BARRIERS BANGLADESHI CANADIANS INITIALLY FACE

By and large, Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada do not seem to have any language barrier as they can converse pretty well in English. The majority of Bangladeshi Canadians, however, lack knowledge of French. Many Bangladeshis live in the Gatineau area (in the province of Québec) due to its affordable housing. While they save on rent, they have difficulty enrolling their children in English schools. Many parents have expressed their frustration as they are unable to coach their children and are never sure how their children are doing and what assistance they might need.

Upon arrival in the NCR, most Bangladeshis rely on their family's informal support system. Bangladeshi families extend various forms of assistance to newcomers, including helping them find a family physician, apply for a health card and open a bank account. They might also direct newcomers to the Coordinator and Senior Settlement Counsellor, Settlement and Integration Program at Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO). Newcomers also have the advantage of directly connecting with OCISO, an organization that supports immigrants. According to Nasir Tarafdar, OCISO's Coordinator and Senior Settlement Counselor, Settlement and Integration Program, over the years, OCISO has served roughly one thousand Bangladeshi immigrants and refugee families out of a total of almost seven thousand Bengali immigrants (Tarafdar 2017). A Canadian of Bangladeshi origin himself, the Senior Settlement Counselor takes a deep interest in providing services that are offered in the areas of education, work permits, employment, education, housing, immigration-related matters, tax filing and so on.

New immigrants in the Ottawa area also enjoy the services provided by the Bengali Community Service Centre of Canada (BCSCC). Established in 2002, the BCSCC serves the local Bengali community. It is an organization run by Bangladeshi Canadians in the Ottawa area for Bangladeshis. Its focuses include: Women's and Children's Issues; Seniors Services; Youth Services; Settlement, Employment and Training Services; and Counseling and Information Services.

First-generation Bangladeshi Canadian immigrants face a unique set of challenges since there are a number of factors at play. Challenges that tend to limit these first-generation immigrants include foreign credential recognition or academic equivalencies, lack of “Canadian” work experience, lack of French language and lack of a social network. Due to a shortage of savings, Bangladeshi newcomers, like other immigrants, are forced to take up jobs at whatever level they can find (such as security guard, salesperson, factory labourer, etc.) to keep the pot boiling. Many find no time to look for employment, or opt for quick training or any other opportunities that do come up. Fortunately, this problem does not exist to the same extent for second-generation Bangladeshis raised in Canada. Both groups, however, experience subtle racial discrimination.

2. RETENTION OF BANGLADESHI CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

Bangladeshis in the NCR do not want to assimilate since they feel that they are quite content with their negotiated identity – i.e., *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*. They take pride in retaining the culture they had known in their country of birth. They recognize that race, religion, language, name and cultural customs such as dress and diet are visible factors identifying them regardless of their time of stay in Canada. For that matter, they know all too well that race alone is the one insurmountable barrier to assimilation. Naturally, they are more focused on retaining the best of both worlds by becoming part and parcel of a diverse Canada.

Although there have been no in-depth case studies or focus group discussions related to this issue, my simple observations and interactions reveal that Bangladeshi/Bengali immigrants negotiate and re-define their “proper” ethnic, cultural, nationalist, and religious identities by creating “separations” and “differences” based on their own understanding of values and ethics. The second-generation often discusses experiences, exchanges information, identifies issues of concern and proposes suggestion for change in seminars and conferences as well as in their daily lives.

By and large, first-generation Bangladeshis in the NCR have retained some essential identity of their country of birth while adapting to the Canadian way of life. There is a marked difference even between the first-generation Bangladeshi Canadians who came in the 1960s and the recently arrived first-generation Bangladeshis. Those who came in the 1960s or earlier seem more attached to Canada in that they and their Canadian-born children are less aware of or interested in the events taking place in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, having lived in Canada where freedom is seen as a core Canadian value, Bangladeshi Canadians have moved on in their lives by redefining their own lifestyle and by acquiring new values in a multicultural Canada.

Second-generation Bangladeshis need to strengthen ethnic solidarity, norms and values through cultural and religious events that relate more to their country of birth than to the country of adoption on the part of their parents. It is interesting to note that both groups (immigrants and Canadian-born Bangladeshis) express their concern during any disaster or emergency situation in Bangladesh or Canada. Fundraising for the 2016 forest fire victims of Fort McMurray is an example of this attachment to the country of adoption in the case of immigrants and the country of birth in the case of Canadian-born Bangladeshis. The level of integration among the first generation is noticeably impressive as they are

constantly moving forward having identified themselves as *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*.

In pursuing their identity, Bangladeshi Canadians have not created any self-contained world of their own. Instead, their world has been juxtaposed between Bangladesh and Canada. In a sense, the lifestyle of Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR is a combination of Bangladeshi and Canadian culture. Almost all of the houses of the community members contain displays from both countries. Handmade show pieces such as *pakha* (a manual fan), *rickshaw* (a manual three-wheeler) *hurricane* (a kind of lamp) and *nakshikatha* (an embroidered quilt) as well as paintings by prominent artists and photographs of natural scenes such as villages, paddy fields, rivers, boats etc. are commonly displayed in their living rooms. Many Muslims have different kinds of Islamic symbols in their houses, such as a portrait of the *Qaba* (the prophet Muhammed's grave where millions of Muslims gather once a year from all over the world) and some Arabic scriptures from the Quran (the holy religious book of Muslims). They also have many pictures, displays and gazettes that are typically Canadian. At the same time, Bangladeshis actively participate in activities on Canada Day including *Bangla Caravan* (discussed below), as well as in Canadian sports and recreation, etc.

Unsurprisingly, the more the recent the immigrants, the more politically sensitive they are in relation to the politics of Bangladesh. This sentiment is more prevalent in relatively new immigrants. It is evident in the ways in which they attach importance to certain national holidays that are solemnly observed in Bangladesh. Their dedication and enthusiasm for the causes of Bangladesh are manifested by their level of participation in community activities such as the observance of *Shwadinota Dibosh* (Victory Day), *Shohid Dibosh* (Martyr Day), *Bangla Nobo Borsho* (Bengali New Year) and other national celebrations (Rahim 1990).

In a sense, Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR seem to be unique in that, unlike their cohorts in other cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton and Vancouver, who tend to be more political in constructing their identity in Canada, Bangladeshis in Ottawa participate without reservation in activities organized by cultural, social and educational organizations. The older first-generation immigrants do not seem as interested in the political ups and downs of Bangladesh as do the recent immigrants.

Seeing the incidence of drug addiction and teenage pregnancy, many new immigrants tend to worry about their children who are in high school. They feel a bit alienated as they choose to associate more with the culture and tradition of their country of origin. Consequently, as their feelings of being alienated become stronger day by day, they move in the opposite direction from their present Canadian life towards the culture, tradition and religion of Bangladesh. This is particularly true since 9/11, an incident that changed the thinking of many Bangladeshis who became, in a sense, more religious following these events. Although Bangladeshi Canadians had been enjoying a relatively secure life, following the 9/11 incident, people of a different colour, race, ethnicity and religion found it hard to believe how suddenly their secure life transformed into an intense feeling of threat and distrust in a country they had known as their "own."

Unfortunately, it was not just the Muslims of the Ottawa area who were affected; instead, the public attitudes towards Muslims throughout the globe became one of suspicion since they were stereotyped as potentially dangerous. Many I talked to recalled how more than a hundred incidents of violence had occurred in Canada immediately

following the September 11 incident. Like other Muslims, Bangladeshi Muslims in Canada had felt insecure for some time, especially seeing that many bearded Sikhs were beaten, *hijab*-wearing women were insulted and a few mosques were vandalized. In a sense, such fear, perceived or real, brought Bangladeshi Canadians together even more in an attempt to strengthen their sense of group identity in Canada.

Seen from that angle, Bangladeshi Canadians are unlike many other ethnic groups in Canada, especially those groups that attempt to achieve one of two incompatible goals – survival as a distinct ethnic group and admittance into the mainstream of Canadian life. Bangladeshi Canadians seem to be rooted in the reality of race and culture – they believe in cultural pluralism in that they can contribute certain parts of their tradition and adapt to certain Canadian traditions (such as having a special turkey dinner with cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving weekend, etc.), but they passionately love all of the occasions relating to their religion in Bangladesh. Children of Bangladeshi origin born in Canada tend to be less pretentious as they know all too well that, no matter how they look upon themselves in their country of birth, people in the street may treat them as someone who is from another part of the world. The colour of their skin makes them look different to the point that they are seen as “outsiders” or “foreigners” in that they are not deemed to be “local” Canadians. Only a white-looking Canadian would pass the perception test of being a “Canadian,” argue Bangladeshi Canadians.

To argue in the same vein, no matter how much Anglo-conformity Bengali immigrants and their Canadian-born children might display, at the end of the day, they are still seen as immigrants or children of immigrants and therefore as perpetually immigrants. This is a reality that Bangladeshi Canadians, whether we are talking about the first, second or third generation of Bangladeshis in Canada, have come to understand and accept accordingly. This is not to say that this is an easy way to situate oneself in Canada culturally. Yet most Bangladeshi Canadians have come to terms with their notion of identity. Bangladeshi Canadians, regardless of their experiences, do not feel “rejected by Canadians.”

There are no universally accepted criteria for ethnic identity. In fact, the criteria used for defining ethnic identity may vary from group to group in relation to time and place and may reflect pressures from the larger society. Peter Weinreich defines ethnic identity “as that part of the totality of one’s self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one’s construal of past ancestry and one’s future aspirations in relation to ethnicity” (Weinreich 2003: 28). Bangladeshi Canadians are cognizant of their personal, social and ethnic identity and associated terminologies.

We know for a fact that conflict does occur when the minority group’s self-definition (or identification in Canada) does not correspond with the perception of mainstream Canadians (i.e., Caucasian Canadians). In that sense, Bangladeshi Canadians, especially those who are immigrants in Canada, are respectful of every culture and are not willing to do away with the culture that they grew up with. Similarly, their Canadian-born children recognize the importance of sticking to the culture and traditions of their parents. They are certainly not ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism, as we understand it, is the firm conviction that one’s culture is superior to that of any other ethnic group. Thus, without being ethnocentric, Bangladeshi Canadians are dynamic, willing to adapt to certain basic “Canadian” culture to the extent possible without assimilating into “Canadian” mainstream culture.

To explain it a bit more, they see themselves as Canadians who are able to bring with them a host of Bangladeshi culture and traditions that become part and parcel of Canada's pluralism. They don't see themselves as being the centre of everything in Canada. Instead, they see themselves as a group with culture and traditions of their own that add to Canada's rich diversity. There are no instances of voluntary segregation, physical or cultural; nor are there any instances of withdrawal from the larger Canadian society to establish their own groups. They live all across the greater Ottawa area and interact with all groups without any reservation both socially and culturally. The existence of various cultural, social and philanthropic groups in the Ottawa area is evidence of their way of becoming a part of the diverse people of Canada, the country they call "home."

Bangladeshi Canadians neither resist social pressure favouring Anglo-conformity nor accept 100% of the mainstream culture. Being conscious of their religio-cultural backgrounds, they have successfully retained their culture and traditions (such as practicing religion, observing religious festivals and observing national events of Bangladesh along with all Canadian national festivals); hence they are actively embracing the best of both worlds.

3. RETENTION OF *BANGLA* LANGUAGE

By and large, the locus of culture is the family, and Bangladeshis in the NCR have taken responsibility for maintaining the culture with which they grew up in Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ottawa area Bangladeshis place emphasis on maintaining their vernacular language by speaking *Bangla* (Bengali) at home and teaching their children the same language to the extent possible; they also socialize with other Bangladeshi families, encourage their children to read the holy scriptures, exposure them to *Bangla* culture, and marry them off within the community or bring in their spouses from Bangladesh. Some families had more success in doing this, while others had less. This, however, did not decrease the number of interracial marriages between Bangladeshis and non-Bangladeshis (that is, Caucasians). In fact, the recent trend is that more and more Canadian-born Bangladeshi boys and girls are seeking their life partners from the mainstream population, often much to the disappointment of their generally conservative parents.

Like many other immigrant communities, Bengalis are creating and preserving their unique identity in the NCR's diverse ethos. In general, Bengalis are a proud people – highly ambitious and always striving for excellence having incorporated certain aspects of Canadian culture into their culture and heritage.

Considering the importance of *Bangla*, several Bangladeshis have worked very hard to establish heritage schools with assistance from the government. The first Bangladeshi *Bangla* school (there had been one *Bangla* school already established by the people of West Bengal, India, who also speak *Bangla*) was opened by an enthusiastic Bengali couple (the husband is an engineer and the wife is a teacher at Bayshore P/S site) having obtained the approval of the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) in 1998. For this couple, especially the teacher, this was a realization of her dream to be a *Bangla* teacher in Canada, having taught for 17 years in Bangladesh.

The couple recognized that it was only natural for the children who were growing up in an English environment to be less inclined to learn *Bangla* on weekends. Being aware

of the acculturation process in Canada, they were a bit apprehensive seeing how a split had started to take place between parents born in Bangladesh and their children born or raised in Canada. It was obvious to them and other parents that their children were becoming acculturated at an increasingly accelerated pace; they were less and less interested in speaking *Bangla*. For the couple, it was a red flag. They began to work even harder.

With the passage of time, the teacher became very successful, demonstrably influencing a large number of parents to send their children to Saturday school. Many parents appreciated the efforts of the couple and jumped at the first opportunity to send their children to *Bangla* schools around the city. Evidently, this became possible because the couple was able not only to generate profound interest among the members of the community but also to persuade them to demand heritage language education from the School Board. Thus, seeing the level of interest, the OCDSB also took interest in expanding the *Bangla* school to other locations in the Ottawa area. The couple even found suitable teachers from within the community.

Today, there are eight registered *Bangla* schools scattered across the NCR, all administered by Bangladeshi Canadians under the district supervision of the OCDSB. Gradually, this particular couple and other teachers of *Bangla* became known to the community, having earned special respect. "From the very beginning, parents cooperated and helped us materialize the plan of establishing and running the *Bangla* school in the Ottawa area; probably, we were able to convince them to understand the importance of learning Bangla in Canada, a country far away from Bangladesh," (Bashar 2017), observed the couple with a great deal of humility. This couple has long been recognized by the community for their dedication and hard work in generating interest among the children to continue their weekend study. Canada Bangladesh Muslim Community (CBMC) recognized the couple for their dedicated work in preserving and disseminating *Bangla* language in the NCR.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE LIVES OF BANGLADESHI CANADIANS

By and large, most of the Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR are Muslims; the rest are Hindus and Buddhists, while there are about four Bangladeshi Christian families in the NCR. They practice their religion without any problem whatsoever. For the most part, they are able to avoid being the target of bullying. Only when racism and ethnophobia raise their ugly heads do visible minorities experience instances of prejudice that persist in the larger society. Having come from a politically vibrant country, Bangladeshi immigrants have brought with them different religious and political philosophies, different sets of social and ethical values, and different mental attitudes, all of which doubtless make imperceptible changes in their Canadian lifestyle and in the quality of life in a Canada that thrives on multiculturalism.

The majority of Bangladeshi Canadian Muslims take their religion very seriously. At the same time, they don't want to isolate themselves from the mainstream culture. To the extent possible, they participate in activities that allow them to practice their religion, and give their children an opportunity to learn about the religious values and responsibilities in Canada. Given that religion is an important part of their lives, both first- and second-generation Bangladeshis remain very keen on ensuring that the children practice their

religion from the beginning of their lives. Below is a short account of the followers of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism.

5. BANGLADESHI MUSLIMS IN THE NCR

Attendance at Islamic Schools

There are quite a few families that choose to send their children to Islamic School – called *Abrar* School – instead of sending their children to free non-denominational schools attended by most of the community's children. In addition to following the Ontario curriculum, the *Abrar* School teaches Islamic Studies including the *Quran*. The Muslim Association of Canada (MAC) runs the school, which does not receive any funding from the government. Instead, the parents pay tuition to cover the full cost. There is also another school called the Ottawa Islamic School that also has a number of Bangladeshi children. As one parent, an economist at Statistics Canada, observed: "Islamic knowledge is utterly important and has no substitute. It provides clear criteria to differentiate between right and wrong and guarantees success in both lives when combined with the knowledge of math, science and English. We've sent our sons to *Abrar* School so that they get institutional knowledge on both – that was an easy choice" (Islam 2017: 1). Evidently, Bangladeshi *Abrar* School graduates have received numerous awards for their outstanding academic performance, for which they have also obtained merit scholarships at various Canadian universities. Approximately 15 students are currently enrolled in the Islamic schools in the Ottawa area. Many parents say that they would have preferred to send their children to the *Abrar* or Ottawa Islamic School if they could afford the tuition fees.

The Importance Bangladeshi Muslims Attach to Learning the Quran with the Right Arabic Accent

There are many Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR, both first-generation and second-generation, who regularly go to "*Al-Furqan*," a coaching school also run by MAC. This is a school that gives individual lessons on the proper Arabic accent, pronunciation, and meanings and interpretations of the verses of the *Quran*. Evidently, many who have been through "*Al-Furqan*" have been able to modify their Arabic accents with a better understanding of the language due to the personalized, one-on-one coaching.

Given how seriously Ottawa Bengali Muslims take their religion, a group of concerned Bangladeshi Canadians have formed several organizations and associations to undertake activities to help them remain focused. Below is a short account of some of the educational, socio-religious and philanthropic organizations formed and run by these Bangladeshi Canadians. In fact, the following are prime examples of their creativity and enthusiasm in moving forward having ensured that their children also embrace the same values and religious obligations in Canada in spite of the many hurdles they have to overcome.

Canada Bangladesh Muslim Community (CBMC)

CBMC (<http://www.cbmc-canada.org>) was founded in 1994 as a value-added not-for-profit organization almost single-handedly by a Bengali Muslim with cooperation from a handful of friends and volunteers. CBMC's objectives are to sustain and promote the religious, cultural and social values, traditions and ideals of Bangladeshi Muslims in Canada by enabling the children of Bangladeshi Muslim Canadians who are born and/or raised in the NCR to think through their identity trajectory and become proud Canadians of Islamic faith. Additionally, they aim to promote greater understanding, mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation among Canadians of diverse cultural, social and multi-faith groups.

CBMC organizes a yearly Blood Donor Clinic in partnership with the Islamic Society of Cumberland (Bilal Mosque) and other interested parties, participates in the yearly Petrie Island Cleaning Initiative in partnership with the Orleans Multicultural Association and organizes an annual picnic through which they encourage the celebration of diversity by engaging children of different ages in various activities during the picnic. CBMC also organizes yearly badminton and basketball tournaments involving community members across the NCR with a view to strengthening bonds among children and their friends, and distributes meat and canned food products for the Ottawa-based *Sadaqa* Food Bank, something that allows children to see and learn from their parents about the concept of "giving."

In addition, CBMC organizes the annual *Iftar Mahfeel* during the month of Ramadan along with associated activities, such as an *Essay Competition*, a *Student of the Year Award* and the recognition of a Canadian of Bangladeshi origin for his/her contribution in his/her field of endeavour through a *Distinction Award*. Referring to CBMC's ongoing activities and ultimate goal, the organization's Vice-President observed: "CBMC's goal and intention is to satisfy *Allah Subhana wa ta'ala* (the most glorified, the most high) by undertaking activities that represent Bangladeshi and Muslim culture and values embedded in Canadian culture" (Zaman 2017). CBMC, in partnership with Human Concern International, launched a scholarship program for Bangladeshi orphans in 2017. Many distinguished guests, such as Senators, Members of Parliament and research scholars, attend the functions and grace the occasions.

In 2016, while introducing a group of young, talented Bangladeshi Canadian students to her colleagues and the Speaker and commending them for their excellent academic performance in high school, Senator Mobina Jaffer stated that these were not just young Canadian students but "Muslim Canadians and future Canadian leaders" (Jaffer 2016: 1). The implicit message was that the problem often arises from other people's perception of visibly ethnic groups of Canadians because of the colour of their skin or any physical attributes.

Muslim Family Gathering of Ottawa (MFGO)

MFGO was established in 1999 to provide a forum in Ottawa for family-oriented Islamic discussions among Muslims in general and Bangladeshi Muslims in particular. It holds a *Halaqa* (study circle) every second Sunday of the month with a potluck lunch. The objectives of the *Halaqa* are to create Islamic Awareness and to learn about *Deen* (the way of life of a Muslim). MFGO's programs are specially oriented towards youth and children by

encouraging them to learn about and practice Islam in their day-to-day life. MFGO also organizes a summer picnic and games for participants of all age groups. It also holds special community events such as *Iftar Mahfeel*, and the celebration of *Eid Al-Fitr* and *Eid Al-Adha*; additionally, with a view to exposing the children to their country of origin, it observes special days (such as Victory Day, International Mother Language Day, etc.) that are observed in Bangladesh.

Under the stewardship of its President and seven other volunteer couples, MFGO has been growing steadily and is doing what it believes in – raising children to become responsible Muslim Canadians. Since 2013, MFGO has also initiated a scholarship program for poor meritorious students in Bangladesh. “May Allah (SWT) provide us the ability to achieve our *niyat* (intention)” (Zaman 2017), observes one of MFGO’s core members.

Ottawa-Bangladesh Muslim Funeral & Social Welfare Organization (OBFMO): Helping You Prepare for the Last Journey

Under the Chairmanship of a Bengali Canadian, and in collaboration with a number of dedicated workers, OBFMO was created in 2010 with a view to assisting fellow Bangladeshi Muslims in dire need of help after the death of a family member. OBFMO’s comprehensive package includes collection of the body from hospital/home, arrangement of all of the appropriate paperwork and payment of expenses related to burial services. Keeping in mind the spirit of helping the needy, OBFMO is committed to helping Bangladeshi Muslims by providing financial assistance to the family of the deceased if the family is not capable of handling the cost. OBFMO facilitates allocation of one or more plots based on a monthly donation for a few years in the Muslim cemetery for the purposes of burial. OBFMO also provides counseling and guidance to surviving family members of deceased Bangladeshi Muslims living in Ottawa.

OBFMO also participates in charitable activities to improve the health and wellbeing of Bangladeshis living in the NCR. Since its inception, it has been promoting and organizing social events such as children’s programs, yearly competitions for young Bangladeshi Canadian boys and girls of various ages involving the recitation of *Quranic* verses, sports and summer camps, and a summer picnic. It celebrates religious events without creating conflict among other groups with similar mandates. In the last few years, OBFMO has expanded its activities and, in partnership with local organizations, has successfully raised over \$30,000 for the Syrian Refugee program and another \$50,000 for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. OBFMO’s appeal to fellow Bangladeshi Muslims in the NCR has been gaining momentum. Everyone around seems enthused with OBFMO’s slogan: “In your time of need, we are here to help you honour the lives of those you love.”

Ottawa-Bangladesh Muslim Funeral & Social Welfare Organization – Youth Group (OBFMOY)
OBFMOY (<http://www.obmfyouth.com/>) is a youth group whose primary focus is to unite and strengthen youth across the Ottawa community to help them deal with various social pressures. Its key services include peer tutoring, mentoring, drug and alcohol counselling, and the promotion of civic and cultural respect through dialogues and conferences.

6. BANGLADESHI HINDUS IN THE NCR

There are about 150 Bangladeshi Hindus in the NCR although the number could be more, according to a popular Bangladeshi social worker. While the Hindu community is growing, it does not have any formal association of its own yet. Most of them join other Bangladeshis (Muslims) for cultural activities. During *Durga Puja*, they generally gather under the banner of *Deshantari* of Ottawa, an established club built by the Bengalis of the state of West Bengal (now called *Bangla*), India. According to Mazumdar, because of the sheer workload surrounding the celebration of *Durga Puja*, Bangladeshi Hindus join hands with their fellow brethren from *Bangla* (West Bengal) for the celebration. Bangladeshi Hindus, however, manage the other two important religious festivals – *Lakshmi Puja* and *Saraswati Puja* – by themselves through the work of a group called *Mongol Dip*. For these two religious festivals, they go to the Hindu Temple of Ottawa-Carleton and Iskcon *Mandir*. Through the celebration of various religious festivals, Bangladeshi Hindus attempt to expose their children to the religio-cultural traditions of the Hindus. The *Mongol Dip* group also organizes a summer picnic for Bangladeshi Hindus that brings them together.

7. BANGLADESHI CHRISTIANS IN THE NCR

This is the smallest group and consists of only about four families, according to one Bangladeshi Christian. Naturally, for every religious festival, especially Christmas, they tend to go to Montreal or Toronto where a significant number of Bangladeshi Christians live. During the Easter Holiday, or on other occasions, however, most of them go to the Ottawa-based St. Maurice Parish which is a Roman Catholic community under the guidance of the Companions of the Cross. They are involved in all other socio-cultural activities with the mainstream Bangladeshi Muslims in the NCR.

8. BANGLADESHI BUDDHISTS IN THE NCR

The number of Buddhist families of Bangladeshi origin in the Ottawa area is not very significant. According to an active member of the Bangladeshi Buddhist community, there are about 20 families in the NCR, totalling about 50 or so individuals (Thowai 2017). Though there are only a small number of them, the majority of Bangladeshi Buddhists are quite well-placed in Canada with steady jobs in the federal, provincial and municipal governments. Some are also employed by private organizations, mostly in the IT field. Some have retired and are enjoying their retired life in the NCR.

Bangladeshi Buddhists in the NCR do not have any Buddhist Pagoda or Temple of their own mainly due to their small number. For worship, or any festive occasion, they go to the Thai Buddhist Temple in Kanata, the Cambodian Buddhist Temple in downtown Ottawa and Gatineau or the Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple in Gloucester, Ottawa and Orleans. Though they have different national backgrounds, their religious affiliations and common

observance of religio-social festivals bring them together for worship, celebration and friendship.

Again, there is no formal association of Bangladeshi Buddhists in the NCR due simply to their small number. There is, however, an informal association of the Bangladeshi Buddhist community that organizes get-togethers in partnership with other Buddhists for religious and social activities in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. Given the importance they attach to certain Bangladeshi national holidays, the Ottawa group also organizes cultural functions with the Buddhists from other countries.

The Bangladeshi Buddhist community has an impressive track record for their spirit of volunteerism. According to a senior Buddhist, who remains very active in cultural affairs of the Buddhist community, community members are involved in numerous types of volunteer work with the Ottawa Police, the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), the City of Ottawa and local Bangladeshi community organizations. In 2016, they formed a cultural organization called "*Maatir Taanay*" (for the love of the soil). One couple personally organized a Bangladeshi cultural show in 2017 to raise funds for the CHEO. The program was so successful that they have committed to undertaking a similar program every year.

While there is not much available information on the religious practices of the Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, there is plenty on Muslim Canadians since they are very large in number. An interesting observation with regard to Bangladeshi Muslim Canadians in the Ottawa area is that their Muslim identity is just as important as their identity as *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, which came as a bolt from the blue, actually reinforced one's identity as a *Muslim Canadian of Bangladeshi background*. Evidently, after the initial shock and horror of the events, Bangladeshi Muslim Canadians got over the associated feelings of insecurity. Despite the disturbing witch-hunt all around the world which pointed the finger at Muslims, Canadian Muslims continued to remain quite comfortable in having multiple identities in Canada. They tell me they are *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*, they are Muslims or Hindus (or whatever might be their religious affiliation) and at the same time they are an integral part of the multiracial and multicultural Canada where they have comfortably retained the culture and religion they have inherited from their country of birth. They have successfully incorporated their cultural attributes into what is referred to as the typical "Canadian" culture. Whether they are first- or second-generation Canadians, all are quite comfortable placing themselves in the scheme of things in Canada, the country they call "home" without any reservation.

9. EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS CREATED BY BANGLADESHI CANADIANS

Ottawa Bangladeshis take a keen interest in their religion, culture and language, and this has prompted them to form a number of organizations with a view to reinforcing their identity in Canada as *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin* by involving their children and grandchildren.

Bangla Caravan

Spearheaded by a number of Bangladeshi Canadians, *Bangla Caravan* is an initiative that began in 2015 to share the richness of *Bangla* (Bengali) culture and heritage with the members of the Canadian multicultural mosaic. This is a unique opportunity, where anyone representing *Bangla* culture and heritage can demonstrate and share their cultural performances with the greater Canadian community, celebrating the diverse treasures that Canadians enjoy.

Every Canada Day (July 1), *Bangla Caravan* takes a lead role in gathering a large number of people in their traditional dress and heading towards Parliament Hill to join the jubilant crowd as part of the grand celebration. Participants, both young and old, join the group wearing typical *Bangali* outfits such as *punjabi*, *paijama*, *lungi* and *saris* of various kinds in various styles; some wear *dhuti*, *gamcha*, *Baul* dress, *Manipuri* dress, Indigenous people's dress and faith-based dress prevalent in *Bangali* society; the wedding dress of the typical Bangladeshi bride and groom may also be seen. Participants carry musical instruments, dance costumes, handicrafts, pictures, banners, festoons, garlands etc. Having joined the crowd, the *Bangla Caravan* makes its way towards Parliament Hill to celebrate Canada Day with friends and family members much to the bewilderment of everyone in the crowd.

Every year, *Bangla Caravan* brings together not only *Bangalis* from Bangladesh but also those from West Bengal; it also invites Indigenous people, new and old settlers from outside of Canada and Canadians of diverse backgrounds to join the Caravan for a display of their culture. As the Caravan moves towards Parliament while the participants sing and dance, the excited members of the crowd, who get carried away, also jump in and join the *Bangla Caravan* parade. *Bangla Caravan* participants thus reflect a large cross-section of people of different religions who speak different languages. Having put aside their differences, they unite under *Bangla Caravan's* banner to show their collective strength as Canadians of diverse backgrounds and education. *Bangla Caravan* also undertakes other cultural activities involving Canadians of various racial backgrounds.

Bangladesh Cultural Society of Ottawa (BCSO)

Founded in 2010 by a group of community leaders, Bangladesh Cultural Society of Ottawa (BCSO) aims to retain Bangladeshi culture and tradition while embracing the multicultural fabric of Canada. Its emphasis is on engaging second-generation children who are being raised in Canada. Its activities are therefore geared toward celebrating the national holidays of Bangladesh, such as *Bijoy Dibosh* (Victory Day), Ekushe February (*Shohid Dibosh*) etc. along with Muslim religious observances such as *Iftar Mahfeel* during the month of Ramadan and Eid-ul Fitr. During these functions, it also engages children of various ages in a competition involving recitation of verses from the Quran. In addition, it also arranges a summer picnic where children and adults get a chance to mingle, play and spend some time together. Though a relatively a new organization, within a short period of time BCSO has commendably increased its membership. Its core team is now reviewing its action plan with a view to expanding its activities surrounding children and young adults.

Canada Bangladesh Education Trust (CBET)

Canada Bangladesh Education Trust (CBET) was established as a registered non-profit organization in August 2012 under the stewardship of their leader and a handful of dedicated volunteers devoted to working in the area of education. Prior to that, in the summer of 2010, Khan had already formed an informal community organization called *Bangla Dersé Quran* (BDQ). It used to hold home-based monthly gatherings at BDQ members' homes. Within two years, the BDQ members successfully formed the present CBET. In January 2014, it became a registered charity organization with Canadian Revenue Agency (www.cbet.ca).

CBET's aim is to make a difference in the lives of those who are not fortunate enough to continue their education due to financial constraints. CBET attempts to support financially challenged students in Canada and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, it gives scholarships to college students in all the 450 sub-districts in the country. As well, as the name suggests, CBET gives scholarships to poor and needy Canadian students in the Ottawa area.

CBET's monthly forum consists of 20-25 families that meet once a month at alternating members' homes for a spiritual gathering. This monthly CBET meeting provides an opportunity for young adults to learn about their heritage and develop a strong sense of ethics to integrate into Canadian society.

CBET also puts out an online monthly magazine called *Canadian Dream* (<http://canadiandream.cbet.ca/>). Since March 2013, *Canadian Dream* has been reaching out to Muslim immigrants of diverse origin in the NCR. This bilingual (*Bangla* and English) e-magazine contains carefully reviewed write-ups not only by Bangladeshi immigrants but also by a large number of immigrants from other countries. Topics such as contemporary issues affecting first- and second-generation Canadian immigrants – including their struggles, ways of overcoming professional barriers, hopes and aspirations, generational gaps, issues affecting minority children, formation of identity of immigrants' children now growing up in Canada, empowerment of women, instances of success, contribution of immigrants etc. – make the magazine worthwhile. *Canadian Dream* has a readership of roughly two thousand.

CBET also has a community TV program (Rogers TV Channel 22) called *Bangladesh Window*, which is the first and only Bangladeshi program available through Rogers Community TV since 2014. This 30-minute monthly program is primarily for educational purposes, to raise awareness of the contribution of Canadians of Bangladeshi origin; it is designed to demonstrate to Canadians at large how this particular segment of the Canadian population has become an integral part of Canada, the country they call "home." Viewers get a chance to see many facets of their own lives reflected in a mirror – hard work, love, compassion, altruism and charity. Like a probing journalist showcasing the contributions of Canadians of Bangladeshi origin, especially in the NCR, CBET's probing interviewer is always on the lookout for individuals or organizations. *Bangladesh Window* is an excellent social vehicle through which CBET tries to motivate young Canadians to involve themselves in charity work from early on.

CBET has also created a portal (www.bangla.cbet.ca) to capture and preserve the sacrifices, successes, challenges and contributions of first-generation Bangladeshi Canadians across the country. It's a relatively new initiative, and since it got off the ground,

CBET has been getting a lot of inquiries about its scope. CBET remains committed to showcasing the lives and achievements of Canadians of Bangladeshi origin. To foster and contribute to the Canadian multicultural mosaic, CBET has also formed an alliance with different ethnic community organizations as well as other Muslim organizations to participate in activities of common interest. For example, by joining hands with other diverse Muslim organizations in the NCR, Ottawa's Muslims were able to raise \$64,000 for the forest fire victims of Fort McMurray, Alberta, donated through the Canadian Red Cross.

From the beginning, CBET has been supportive of the aspirations of Canada's First Nations community. CBET has made a humble contribution for the preservation of the Ottawa First Nations' heritage shelter. CBET's scholarships to Ottawa high schools' graduating students are designed to ensure that the students of First Nations high schools in Canada do receive the award. In 2017, CBET constituted two scholarships of \$1,000 each for Carleton University and Ottawa University, and one scholarship of \$750 for Algonquin College. CBET annually holds a *Pitha* Festival, a Multiethnic Free 400+ persons *Iftar* Program, a Fun Day, a Fundraising Dinner, Volunteer Awards, a High School Graduation Awards Ceremony and Young Professional Networks.

CBET's Youth Forums generally include discussion by and for youth, some of whom have already joined the workforce while some are continuing university studies. The subject areas they discuss include: racism, bullying and xenophobia; their notions of identity; simultaneous attachment to Canada and their country of origin; their relationship with other Canadians (who are also multiracial) including common characteristics and also differences; and what is unique in their group solidarity as *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*. Small groups and discussants record approaches and solutions as they see fit. As part of its outreach program, CBET maintains cordial relationships with the Ottawa city Mayor and Councilors, provincial MPPs and Federal MPs in the NCR. Elected representatives of all three levels happily join CBET's events and activities.

Cure for Women and Children (CWC)

Established in 2015, Cure for Women and Children (CWC) is an Ottawa-based grassroots project that raises funds to provide free access to treatments and healthcare services to impoverished women and children of Bangladesh. CWC is the result of an initiative by a group of Bangladeshi Canadian women passionate about maternal, women's and children's health. CWC's main objectives include raising funds to: (1) Provide surgeries for women who have childbirth-related injuries such as uterine prolapse and obstetric fistula; and (2) Provide medical equipment for neonatal health care. Since its inception, CWC has raised over \$30,000 CAD for these causes. These funds have helped to provide life-enhancing surgeries to 35 women at two well-known institutions in Bangladesh. CWC also funded 15 lifesaving pieces of equipment for newborns, which were donated to Dhaka Medical College Hospital's Special Care Neonatal Unit. CWC holds various campaigns and fundraising events to raise awareness as well as funds. Still in its infancy, CWC is partnering with institutions in Bangladesh, but hopes to expand globally in other developing countries where women and children have limited or no access to proper healthcare. CWC is now a project under Human Concern International (HCI).

Proactive Education for All Children's Enrichment (PEACE)

Formed in 2007, Proactive Education for All Children's Enrichment (PEACE) is a Canadian not-for-profit organization based in Ottawa and spearheaded by a Bangladeshi Canadian with cooperation from a Bengali Canadian professor at the University of Ottawa. PEACE's mission is to establish innovative and non-traditional evening and weekend schools for young people from different parts of the world, with Ottawa being the centre of delivery. PEACE, in collaboration with AlivEducation, has been offering an academic coaching model to students from elementary through high school in Ontario. It is committed to offering its services to the children of underprivileged communities from different parts of the world. PEACE has been able to support more than 500 students since its establishment. The students come from all backgrounds, which gives them a chance to meet with peers of diverse origin, something that brings them closer to each other.

Sanchari

Founded in 2010 by a group of Bangladeshi Canadians in Ottawa, *Sanchari* is a not-for-profit organization run with the help of members' contributions and a host of sponsors. It is an Ottawa-based cultural group dedicated to showcasing the rich and diverse *Bangla* cultural heritage among the members of the first and second generations of Bangladeshi Canadians. Since its inception, *Sanchari* has organized cultural programs in which new generations of children promote and engage with Bangladeshi tradition and culture. It has also participated in a number of national and international events. The most recent performance by *Sanchari* was held on July 1, 2017 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canada. The celebratory performance was broadcasted live on TV and attended by a number of national and international dignitaries on Canada's Parliament Hill, and was an amazing example of Canada's pluralism.

Sukara

Established in 2012, Sukara is an informal group of empathetic Bangladeshi Canadians who got together to combine their charitable efforts based on the belief that their collective effort will have a much greater impact than the sum of their individual efforts. The group consists of 11 families, all of whom are professionals in various fields. They chose to name the organization Sukara, which is a Sanskrit word for charity. Recognizing that education is the key to emancipation from the shackles of poverty and that the journey towards self-sufficiency requires accessible basic healthcare, Sukara's primary focus is on health and education.

Sukara has raised \$25,000 for the Ahsania Mission Cancer & General Hospital in Dhaka, which provides affordable and/or free medical care to the destitute and underprivileged. It has also provided financial support to the Disabled Children's Fund (DCF) in Bangladesh, which provides education, job training and placement, and other social support to the disabled and their families. It has also provided the bulk of the funds to set up a sewing training center to train disabled individuals and provide job placement opportunities in the burgeoning garments sector, and has provided funds to DCF to set up a computer training centre for persons with disabilities. In terms of local causes, its charity work includes participation in the Terry Fox Run and fundraising for the Children's

Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO). Sukara maintains complete transparency regarding the disbursement of funds.

Bangladesh Canada Association of Ottawa Valley (BACAOV)

Unfortunately, Bangladesh Canada Association of Ottawa Valley (BACAOV), which was formed in 1971 by a handful of Bengalis, became divisive over the years and, having changed management and with loss of its membership, has now gone into a hiatus for quite some time.

Summary

To sum up, Bangladeshis in Ottawa have created their own culture and tradition of “giving” to the community at large, having placed themselves in a position where they are able to accept certain Canadian core values (such as compassion for fellow human beings) and retain certain socio-religious traditions of their country of origin. This is true in the case of both first- and second-generation Bangladeshi Canadians.

10. CONCLUSION

My own observations and experiences have shown that a number of personality characteristics are associated with success in living and working in Canada, including interest in mainstream Canadian culture, flexibility, tolerance, initiative, open-mindedness, sociability, adaptability and positive self-image.

By and large, all Bangladeshi immigrants and their children in the NCR have successfully integrated into what is called mainstream Canadian culture by maintaining their Bangladeshi identity as *Canadians of Bangladeshi origin*. Nevertheless, it is also predictable that, as long as immigrants from Bangladesh continue to come to Canada, they will remain more vibrant politically; second-generation Bangladeshi Canadians see themselves slightly differently since they don't have the same attitudinal baggage as their parents. In that sense, they are more “Canadian” in their thinking and behaviour than their parents, who have also adopted many “Canadian” manifestations. Second-generation Bangladeshis don't seem to be conflicted in the ways in which their parents have struggled with their identities. This is certainly not indicative of the assimilation of Bangladeshi Canadians, however. This may be the right place for us to highlight the difference between the concept of assimilation and that of integration. Assimilation means accepting the new culture while rejecting one's own culture, while integration means adapting to the new culture while retaining one's own culture.

What is lacking among Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR is an interest in engaging in Canadian politics, whether federal, provincial or municipal. So far, neither the first- nor the second-generation Bangladeshis in the NCR have displayed any interest in becoming involved in politics in any manner. A number of Bangladeshis are, however, card-carrying members of the Liberal, Conservative or National Democratic Party. Two years ago, a Bangladeshi Canadian (an aspiring female political rookie) sought the Liberal Party nomination in a federal Ottawa riding, but failed miserably.

What sticks out clearly from my research is an important characteristic of Bangladeshi Canadians in the NCR – that is, their determination to remain engaged in volunteer work. The phenomenon of volunteerism is inherent in Bangladeshi Canadians regardless of age. Many are working for the *Sadaqua* Food Bank, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the Canadian Diabetic Association, the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada and Human Concern International, to name just a few organizations. Needless to say, it is through volunteerism that these Bangladeshi Canadians have adjusted to a new life in Canada, as it has allowed them to practice new language skills, build social networks and gain Canadian experience, as well as develop a sense of attachment to and integrate into their country of adoption. Bangladeshi Canadians are also volunteering on various Boards and Commissions, such as Human Concern International, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Commissioner’s Advisory Committee on Visible Minorities (ACVM) and the South Nepean Muslim Community, to name a few.

Overall, the large majority of Bangladeshi immigrants in the NCR have prospered and are better off economically than ever before. Today, they have found the freedom and economic security for which they chose to leave their country of birth. All Bangladeshi newcomers, regardless of their age, need to adapt to a new environment and a new social system – including new rules and conditions with regard to education, health services, social services, housing, transportation and banking, as well as new and different habits, customs and social values.

Bangladeshi Canadians are now showing their cumulative pride, energy, enterprise and courage in doing everything that they do in Canada as a part of Canada’s fabric. We have already noted how Senator Mobina Jaffer talked about young Bangladeshi Canadians at the Senate:

Today we have in the gallery students from the Canada Bangladesh Muslim community. I asked them to attend today and to visit our place of work, the Parliament of Canada. Honourable senators, in a world which is plagued with negative stereotypes of Muslims, especially young Muslims, I ask you to join me here today in recognizing these hard-working Canadian youths. These remarkable people will become our future leaders who will continue to build this remarkable country of ours – Canada. (Jaffer 2016: 3)

The reality on the ground, however, is a bit different. Although Bangladeshi immigrants become Canadian citizens, they, like all other visible minorities, are still regarded as “immigrants,” – that is, they are not seen as “locals,” but rather as “foreigners.” This includes first-generation Canadians who are actually immigrants, as well as their Canadian-born children and grandchildren; all are grouped together as immigrants or “foreigners.” This is a matter of perception by mainstream Canadians. Regardless, we may safely conclude that our children and grandchildren – and their children and grandchildren – have the same hope for achievement as the rest of Canadians regardless of race and ancestry, and the same hope of attaining the same levels of prominence or success in the Canada we collectively call “home.”

This leads me to concur with what the news media says about the “Canadian Dream.” A Harris poll conducted in October 2015, for example, discovered that 87% of people born in Canada believe in the Canadian Dream, while 91% of people who immigrate to Canada think the Canadian Dream is a reality (Dube 2015). The Canadian Dream is defined as possessing a good-paying job in Canada that one likes, having enough free time available to

enjoy life, and being a homeowner. In a 2016 Environics poll, 83% of Muslims were “very proud” to be Canadian, compared with 73% of non-Muslim Canadians who said the same thing. Canadian Muslims reported “Canada’s freedom and democracy” as their greatest source of pride, and “multiculturalism and diversity” as the second greatest. Among Canadian Muslims, 94% reported a “strong” or “very strong” sense of belonging to Canada. Among Canadian Muslims, 48% attend mosque at least once a week; 53% of women wear some sort of head-covering in public (48% wear the hijab, 3% wear the chador and 2% wear the niqab). Most immigrants believe in the “Canadian Dream.”