

**THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF A FIRST- GENERATION
BENGALI IMMIGRANT**

Religion and culture are two of the most prominent influences on the identity of an individual. This paper focuses on the transition of my religious outlook as a Bengali immigrant in Canada. It synthesizes my personal experience of growing up within a South Asian Muslim family and community and finding my true religious identity. I focus especially on the influence of religion on my adaptation to new elements I was introduced to as an immigrant – such as food, attire, and culture – compared and contrasted with the impact it could have had if I started my journey here in Canada as a “non-Muslim,” “spiritual,” or “atheistic” believer, or a second-generation Bengali Canadian. I then consider the possibility of the contrary – that is, the effects of immigration on religious beliefs and whether this influenced my transition to a religious limbo. I will be using a comparative approach to examine the relationship of immigration and religion from both these angles to form my theory that as first-generation immigrant children or teenagers, we are unable to experience complete religious freedom due to family beliefs and societal norms. Even if an individual grows up agreeing with and following the same religious beliefs as the rest of the family, they are incapable of being transparent about their opinion regarding religion in a Bengali cultural setting. The concept of home as a religious space will also be further analyzed in this paper, and through personal stories and reflections, I will discuss the significance of religion in relation to Bengali immigrant families and their social institutions, workplaces, schools, and more.

“Astagfirullah, astagfirullah, astagfirullah.” I uttered this word a thousand times the first time I ever swore in public. This was in my first year as an immigrant in Canada; I was 11 years old and in Grade 6. During lunch hour, I got into a heated conversation with a classmate, and for the first time ever I said the “B” word. It was a new word I had recently learned from watching TV, or perhaps I had picked it up from a conversation I had heard on the street. It was never used in my household; in fact, my parents had a strict “no swearing” rule in the house like most other parents. I was so angry and hurt by my classmate’s behaviour that it just came out of my mouth. Instead of clearing the air with the individual whom I had fought with and sworn at, I sought forgiveness from Allah. My devotion to my god came before anything else at the age of 11. As I grew into a teenager, however, my priorities gradually changed and so did my religious outlook.

As a first-generation immigrant, I was brought up in a Bengali Muslim family, practicing the ways of Islam. Children at this stage are introduced to several new elements at school, where we spend the majority of our time. A microcosm of culture, food, languages, and even new religions are some of the many things we experience. As we explore each of these elements, we adapt to new hobbies, new habits, and new favourite

cuisine; some of us even start to dress differently. Similarly, we start to notice new religions and the ways of life practiced under these different religions, which have ultimately shaped me as an individual. In this paper, I would like to further explore and discuss this transition of becoming a Bengali-Canadian youth, and the impact of immigration on religion.

Islam is the largest religion in Bangladesh, and my family have been moderate followers of Islam for generations. As we migrated to Canada, the way we followed this religion has transformed slightly. For example, we were not able to pray five times a day, and during the month of Ramadan we could not fast for 30 days straight. However, we did participate religiously in some of the biggest Islamic celebrations, such as *Eid*. Bangladesh has a very rich and diverse culture which is reflected through art, music, film, and the number of cultural events celebrated across the country. Of the more prominent celebrations, Bengali New Year, *Eid-ul-fitr* and *Eid-ul-adha* are some of the most celebrated events across the world for Bengalis. These events are also promoted by the different Bengali organizations built within foreign countries for the purpose of spreading and preserving Bengali culture.

As a child growing up in this community, it was rather easy for me to learn more about these big celebrations. My parents have always encouraged me to participate as a singer in cultural programs in the community. They have also hosted dinners at home to celebrate these special days with other Bengali families, which gave me more opportunities to learn about these religious or cultural events. What I took away from all these events was that even though we didn't pray five times a day, we were still considered followers of Islam. Even though we did not fast for the whole month of Ramadan, we still celebrated the big *Eid-ul-Fitr* by buying fancy dresses and enjoying a lot of traditional Bengali food. Even though we were not entirely following all the laws of the religion, we followed some extremely important ones, such as "no pork," "no alcohol," and "no provocative dresses for women." As a Bengali Muslim youth, I was a strict follower of all these rules, but these rules only.

At my elementary school, Mount Pleasant (which I attended for two years, in Grade 6 and 7), I forced myself to follow each of these rules very strictly, despite not knowing the clear reasoning behind them. Of course it was illegal for me to consume alcohol at this age, which made it easy to avoid. Pork was also easy to avoid, as I have never really enjoyed the smell of it – or perhaps I was subconsciously nauseated by the smell because it was restricted for us. The rule I was very reluctant to follow was the one dictating how "girls should dress." There are several reasons why I protested.

Islam suggests, "in general, standards of modesty call for a woman to cover her body, particularly her chest." The Quran calls for women to "draw their head-coverings over their chests" (24:30-31), and the Prophet Muhammad instructed believing women to cover their bodies except for their face and hands. Most Muslims interpret this to require head coverings for women. Some Muslim women cover the entire body, including the face and/or hands.

For men, "the minimum amount to be covered is between the navel to below the knee." Like many other Bengali Muslim families, my family did not follow the dress code entirely; however, we were expected to dress in a "decent" or "modest" way. This entailed that we were to dress very close to how we would dress back home. For example, I was asked not to wear dresses that were too short, sleeveless tops, or shorts. This was not a difficult task, as we live in a city like Vancouver, which has lower temperatures for most

months. However, during the summer months, I often wanted to wear summer dresses, which my mom would sometimes purchase for me – with the special request that I not wear them in front of other Bengali families. The reason was gossip, and negative connotations that my mother expected from our family friends or other Bengali community members. In my opinion, Bangladeshi or the subcontinental culture in general does not promote individuality, and youths of my age can often feel burdened by the pressure of culture and religion. It is a very tight-knit culture, where members of the society feel entitled to express their opinions and people tend to seek validation from other members. “*Manush ki bolbe*,” meaning “what would people say,” is something I always heard from my mother. Of course, there were no bad intentions behind it, and it was not meant to demean me in any way. However, as a child, what I took away from this whole concept was: a) we are not allowed to dress a certain way because of our religion; and b) we are also not allowed to dress a certain way because we are Bengali. I didn’t quite understand which one was more important to abide by, because Islamic standards for modesty are quite different from Bengali culture’s standards for modesty. For example, in Bengali culture, showing one’s stomach and back while wearing a *saree* is acceptable; by contrast, this would be deeply frowned upon in Islamic culture. Although we continued to celebrate our religious festivals here in Canada over the last 13 years, we also gradually drifted away from all the rules and laws of this religion. From praying a couple of times a week to almost never, from fasting 4-5 times a year to none, from drinking no alcohol to taking sips of wine here and there, from always covering your legs to wearing shorts – everything happened within this span of 13 years for me. This transformation happened gradually as I grew older and adapted to my new environment, with the permission of my family (even as an adult). However, all this is still disapproved of by Bengali Muslim society.

My fear gradually transitioned from fear of a higher power to fear of disapproval from members of the society. From a very young age, there was an inner struggle between a young Bengali, Muslim, immigrant girl and a girl trying to assimilate with the culture here and find her individual voice. There were so many roles to choose from, yet we were never truly given the opportunity to choose how we wanted to live our lives individually. It was either family or the society or religion dictating the formation of our identity. To elaborate more on the “*manush ki bolbe*” theme, I once asked my parents what would happen if I married a Caucasian Muslim man – if they would accept him. In response to my question, they implied that it was not okay to marry outside my race because I would not be able to adjust to my husband’s culture and vice versa. In addition, our families would have nothing in common to bond over. If I had simply rephrased my question – “What if I married a Caucasian man?” – the answer would perhaps have been that it is against our religion to marry someone outside of our religion. As a Bengali person living in Bangladesh, this is often not an issue even to be considered because of the limited number of foreigners living in our country. In the case of Bengalis, I personally have experienced the situation to be very challenging as we grow up in a multicultural community. As a 12- or 13-year-old, when I was starting to develop emotions for another person, the first thing I personally remember considering was this individual’s religion and race. As I grew older and made male friends who were not Muslim or Bengali, I would subconsciously restrict myself from feeling any attraction towards them, a restraint that I would not impose in the case of a boy who was both Bengali and practiced Islam. Could this possibly be because of the way I was brought up? Or perhaps it was due to the fear of people talking: “*manush ki bolbe*?” This is a

question I cannot answer, as it goes way beyond my expertise, but if I had to guess, I would say it was because I was always scared of disappointing my family, my family friends, and the Bengali community, because their expectation has always been that I would marry into another Muslim Bengali family. What I have realized now as an adult is that both of these characteristics – being Bengali and Muslim – do not act as that much of a restraint for me anymore as I don't consider myself to be an ordinary follower of Islam, nor do I only bond with people of my own race.

Diaspora always has an effect on religious views and sentiments; however, for every individual it is a unique experience. For myself, it was definitely on the more challenging side, yet I don't believe I could have become the person I am today without facing these challenges. For example, religion for my family and me has been a bonding element. It was the magnet that attracted other Bengali Muslims living in Vancouver and helped form relationships that eventually bloomed into great friendships. Douglas S. Massey and Monica Espinoza Higgins (2011) state that "whatever one's view, as religion came to be accepted as an important mediator between immigrants and society, sociologists began once more to incorporate it into their thinking and models" (1372). Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) offered concrete empirical examples of how religion was used instrumentally by immigrants to advance their interests in the United States, and Hirschman (2004) argued that religion offered immigrants three critical benefits: refuge, resources, and respect. This is exactly what religion did for us in Canada; it was a way for us to connect with people here in the new world, but also a way for us to stay connected to the world we left behind back home.

I have spent 11 years of my life in Bangladesh and 13 years here in Canada. I have experienced the culture and religion in both countries. Because I spent such a significant amount of time in Bangladesh, my attachment to all these elements was much stronger compared to those who left Bangladesh right after birth or were born abroad. When I first came to Canada, this attachment certainly made it difficult for me to assimilate into the new society. I had to be aware of the food I was eating and the clothes I was wearing, and make sure not to do things that are considered "*gunah*," or sins. This resulted in me being very aware of my surroundings, always thinking about my actions and their consequences from a very young age. As I developed into a teenager, religion to me started to become a bit more abstract because of the lack of knowledge and practice. This metamorphosis was a slow process due to the society constantly reminding me of my identity as a Bengali Muslim girl. It is also considered impolite for a teenager in our culture to express his or her opinion if it contests the opinion of the elders. Religion especially is a very sensitive topic to question elders about. This change is not because of how my parents treated me, as they have always supported all my rational and irrational decisions and opinions. However, I was always asked to be considerate of the rest of the community members who were directly or indirectly related to my family. Because of this, I often felt trapped in my own cultural and religious limbo that I couldn't seem to get out of.

Either way, I came to the conclusion as an adult that my experience of finding my true identity involved several stages of negotiation with myself and others. In my mind, the perfect analogy for religion would be a Rorschach inkblot test. We see what we want to see subconsciously because of our upbringing, extraneous influences such as culture and friends, or even life-altering moments. The same girl who was afraid of swearing and prayed to god for forgiveness now feels more or less detached from an Islamic identity. Western culture preaches freedom of opinion and speech, and over the last 13 years

certain aspects of it got ingrained into my family environment. Perhaps this melting pot of influence made my parents respect my choices and opinions, for which I am eternally grateful.

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