

ROUNDTABLE I: MIGRATION, SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY SERVICE IN GREATER VANCOUVER

1. OUTLINE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis attempted to document the past and present of Bengalis in Canada – their migration and settlement patterns and their contributions to the Canadian mosaic and multiculturalism. The conference also tried to shape the future of Bengali Canadians by compiling information, insights and reflections not only from Bengali academics and scholars but also from community members and residents of Greater Vancouver. The general purpose of the roundtable session was to engage community members from diverse professional backgrounds in a discussion on the topic at hand, and to hear their personal stories related to migration and settlement experience. The more specific objectives of this roundtable were as follows:

- To discuss and document the history and settlement patterns of Bengali migrants.
- To generate dialogue related to migration experience, and to the challenges and achievements of the Bengali community in Greater Vancouver.
- To understand the role of settlement services and community organizations in the settlement process of local Bengalis.

The roundtable was planned, designed and moderated by the author of this report. Participants were invited by the author, and the objectives and expected outcomes of the session were explained to them. They were also emailed a few written questions to ponder in preparation for the discussion. Participants were asked to share their personal experience and opinions, and to engage in conversation about the challenges of migration, including: finding employment; family life and raising children; coping strategies and contributions to Canadian society; and the role of settlement or community organizations in the settlement and inclusion of Bengali migrants. At the table, rather than posing the exact questions shared beforehand, the moderator kept the discussion unstructured and free-flowing to ensure open dialogue. The discussion was recorded in writing by two appointed note-takers. Participants were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in the written report, and that the discussion would be summarized as common themes relating to the experiences of Bengali migrants in Greater Vancouver.

2. PARTICIPANTS

A total of 12 community members participated in the roundtable. All except one were of Bangladeshi origin (one was from West Bengal, India) and only one was born outside of Canada. A few of the participants had migrated from a different country such as the UK or

the USA, and a few had landed previously in provinces other than British Columbia. There were three community and settlement service providers, a couple of engineers and a couple of retired government officials; the rest came from other professional and service backgrounds. Most of the participants had been in Canada for over five years, though there were a few newcomers at the table. The earliest year of migration among participants was reported to be 1964. All except one were of Muslim faith. All but one could speak fluently in Bengali; however, the discussion took place in English since that was the preferred language.

3. MAJOR THEMES OF THE DISCUSSION

The common themes related to migration and life in Canada as discussed at this table ranged from issues of identity to discrimination and struggles including lack of proper accreditation and un/der/employment, and barriers to becoming part of mainstream Canadian society and culture. Some coping strategies and ways out were also discussed. The following broad themes emerged during the lively discussion:

What's in a Name?

According to the lived experience of a veteran member who migrated to Canada in the mid-1960s, people used to get hired in good faith without having to display original documents or certificates in those days. In addition, changing names and related legal documents was easier compared to current procedures. The issue of name changes led to a vibrant discussion about identity and names.

While the most common reason for name changes in Canada is a change in marital status, a few Bengalis at the table said they often contemplated changing their names due to the challenges and often discrimination they faced due to the cultural origin and religious beliefs reflected in their names. One person shared his experience of having a friend suggest that he change his original name and take a French or English name, since the chance of getting called for a job interview was astonishingly lower in the French-speaking province of Quebec if one had a native Bengali name. Several other participants shared similar concerns and challenges, while a few mentioned the nuisance they suffered in their everyday lives due to the fact that their Bengali names were difficult for most Canadians to pronounce. They often had to shorten their original name or adapt it to a more Anglo-sounding name to avoid embarrassment in public spaces. Raising another serious issue related to names, participants discussed how having a name that reflects religious beliefs could often translate into hours of excessive security checks before they were able to board a flight.

In fact, discrimination against job applicants based on ethnic-sounding or foreign names is well researched and documented. For example, a *Globe and Mail* report (Immen 2011) stated that even ethnic minority immigrants raised and educated in Canada could be at a disadvantage in terms of job hunting solely because of their foreign-sounding names. One person at the table pointed out that in order to address this problem, a new policy has been proposed in Canada to remove identifying details such as name and gender from resumes so that the hiring process can be anonymous and free from conscious and unconscious biases of employers and hiring committees. According to *CBC News* (Common 2016), Liberal MP Ahmed Hussen recently stood up in Parliament to suggest that the

federal government adopt Britain's policy of name-blind recruitment for public services. Such steps may reduce discrimination against ethnic minority applicants based on names that reflect ethnicity and religious beliefs.

Employment and Inclusion Barriers

Meaningful and suitable employment is the most important vehicle to successful settlement; yet many newcomers encounter challenges in finding jobs commensurate with their qualifications and caliber. Participants at the table talked about such barriers and impediments, saying that lack of "Canadian experience" is an extra hurdle for newcomers, who have to prove themselves to be many times better than their Canadian counterparts because most mainstream employers are suspicious of newcomers and instead want to hire people from the same or similar cultures as themselves. Even those who upgrade their skills to gain Canadian certification and exposure still struggle in the employment sector because employers tend to prefer those that are more similar to themselves.

It was pointed out that employers often view equivalency exams for professional degrees as appropriate for educational institutions, but not fitting for the hiring process. Furthermore, regulations and laws related to certain professions often vary between provinces and territories, and therefore equivalency exams taken in one province may not be valid in another. This creates extra challenges for professional immigrants, especially because certain provinces may have more job opportunities than others but moving to those provinces may require retaking those exams to acquire a professional license. Another issue is communication skills, which many Bengali immigrants tend to lack or ignore, while Canadian employers make hiring decisions based on candidates' interpersonal and communication skills. As a result, many Bengali professionals find it hard to obtain a professional job despite their excellent hard skills and qualifications. Thus there is a big disconnect between the Canadian immigration system and Canadian employers' hiring policies and practices; people that are accepted into Canada as skilled immigrants for their specific credentials do not actually find jobs in their respective fields in Canada.

Intersecting Barriers

It was reflected in the discussion that some Bengali immigrants face more intersecting challenges than others. It is usually more difficult to immigrate and settle at an older age, especially with larger families. Older adults, especially women with children, may have to juggle work, family and parenting issues. They may find it hard to go back to study and upgrade their skills in Canada when they have to prioritize taking care of their family and their children's education. On the other hand, younger and single immigrants may face fewer barriers and time constraints related to settlement and integration, as they can focus on retraining themselves to find a decent job. However, it was also pointed out that the value and support women can and do bring to families must be recognized. Children in immigrant families are more likely to be successful when mothers do well in terms of employment and stress management. Therefore, the Canadian government also needs to support immigrant women and families.

Lack of Community Support

There was some dialogue about the lack of community support for Bengali newcomers. In particular, many newcomers sense a lack of willingness on the part of professional Bengalis

who have been successful in Canada to help fellow Bengalis. Rather, successful Bengalis seem to dissociate themselves from the community. All the participants at the table felt that the Bengali community needs to be more supportive to each other to overcome the stigma and embarrassment around struggling with employment or doing survival jobs. Moreover, Bengalis should try to build connections in the local Canadian community, mingle with their neighbors from different cultures and be part of the multicultural community. The majority of Bengali immigrants are unaware of the free community resources and services available to provide settlement support for newcomers. Free booklets with such information are handed out to newcomers at the airports upon their arrival to Canada. However, most people do not even read or use those booklets, as the settlement service providers at the table had noticed.

An example of a success story was shared to show that when Bengalis come together to change systems through organized action and lobbying the government and regulatory bodies, they can move mountains. The Association of Professional Engineers (APE) was unaware that training in Bangladesh was at the same level as that in Canada, and required Bangladeshi engineers to take additional academic courses and learn materials they had already learned in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi engineers overcame this problem by organizing themselves and inviting the Association for seminars. This made the APE realize that Bangladeshi engineers were already trained and knowledgeable in the areas they were asked to take courses in. Now they are no longer required to take those extra courses.

Coping Strategies for Success

Participants shared their own survival strategies and offered various suggestions and tips for newcomers and immigrants to be successful in Canada:

- Success depends on strength of conviction and the ability to face challenges and be adaptable, according to one participant. Another participant thought newcomers need to be prepared to take hard knocks. Some newcomers tend to see themselves in terms of who they were in their home countries and do not want to accept the current reality they are facing. They need to change this mindset and leave their “baggage” behind.
- Flexibility is important. For example, an engineer who specialized in a highly competitive area was initially successful in finding a job, but was ultimately laid off. He pursued additional training in another less prestigious area of engineering in which he had some experience, and eventually became very successful working in that field.
- A positive attitude is a must to survive and be successful. One of the participants shared his own story, saying that when he first immigrated, he knocked on the doors of neighbors and employers telling them that he had a degree in a certain field and was looking for a job. Later, however, he realized that skills are more important and appealing to employers than degrees. He started working in a survival job, but gained valuable insights into how Canadian society and systems work.
- People should not shy away from asking for help from neighbors and other people around them. One can only benefit by asking people for help with finding a job. In the worst possible scenario, one might get rejected. Yet people in Canada are usually

helpful, and they often refer anyone in need of assistance to someone they think would be able to help if they cannot be of help themselves.

- Volunteering can be extremely helpful in gaining Canadian experience and building networks. Sometimes volunteer service leads to paid employment, as it gives the organization a chance to see what skills someone has to offer.
- Improving communication and spoken English language skills is vital. Volunteering for organizations and socializing with non-Bengali or multicultural neighbors and communities can help in this regard. While mixing with Bengalis can be comforting, limiting interactions to only Bengalis can create barriers to getting out of ethnic/job ghettos.
- Immigrants need to become familiar with the Canadian system. Bengali newcomers tend to rely heavily on their friends and fellow Bengalis for information, employment and settlement support. This can lead to receiving wrong information and can result in confusion and mistrust. It is better to find professional support, such as proper employment counseling. A lot of information is available on the internet as well, and a simple Google search can help locate employment counseling and other settlement services.
- Long-time residents and successful professionals need to share success stories of how they reached where they are now. They need to inspire and support other Bengalis, especially newcomers.
- Online spaces, social media outlets and modern technologies should be used to build networks and support groups for newcomers. Facebook groups can be helpful; for example, there is a Facebook group for prospective Bangladeshi students in Canadian Universities. Similar virtual support groups can be formed for newcomer professionals.

4. CONCLUSION

The Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis aimed to document the history, settlement procedure and contributions of Bengali migrants in Canada. The roundtable discussion forum made an attempt to include the participation and voices of local Bengali community members in Greater Vancouver in this dialogue and documentation process. The invited participants engaged in an enthusiastic discussion on the topic and shared their experiences of migration, including their settlement challenges as well as their successes. They were pleased to be part of this conversation and conference, and hoped that their voices would be useful not only in terms of collecting and reporting their lived experiences, but also in shaping improved policies, programs and services for future newcomers, especially Bengali immigrants in Canada.

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