

Appendix 1:

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MY REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFERENCE

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

My participation at last week's (Sept. 16-17, 2017) two-day conference entitled *Canada 150 Conference on the Migration of Bengalis to British Columbia* and organized by Professor Habiba Zaman (SFU) and Dr. Sanzida Habib (Centre for India and South Asia Research) at UBC was one of the highlights of my recent professional activity. Having brought together a large number of scholars, artists, and community members to examine and document the history, settlement patterns, and contributions of Bengali Canadians (originating from Bangladesh and India's West Bengal, now called Bangla), the conference was a great success, to put it succinctly.

Seeing the dearth of primary immigration records of the migration patterns of Bengali Canadians, Professor Zaman took special initiative to arrange a conference that would address this issue in particular as well as a host of other associated issues and challenges faced by this particular segment of the Canadian population. Having participated in the conference, I have no hesitation in stating that it met the first set of Professor Zaman's expectations – namely, to gather knowledge about the Bengali population whose specific history and circumstances within Canada have thus far been overlooked by the country's historical establishment.

In their speeches, both keynote speakers – Dr. Tania Das Gupta and Dr. C. Emdad Haque – touched on the issues surrounding the theme of the conference in a way that stunned the audience, who were absolutely spellbound; sitting in silence in which you could have heard a pin drop, the attendees listened to the keynote speakers' presentations, which were rich with historical data and fascinating anecdotes based on primary sources. Through their research work, both speakers clearly demonstrated their deep knowledge and understanding of the subject at hand. Consequently, they aroused profound interest among the participants and attendees, who interacted with the speakers during the Q&A session with discernibly eager avidity.

The presentations by all other designated speakers/presenters, who included both first- and second-generation Canadian Bengalis, also generated enthusiasm among the attendees to the point that there were numerous follow-up questions. All of the narratives were superb, with presenters demonstrating a keen sense of what would be interesting to their audience. In discussing the issues of identity formation, cultural adaptation, and the retention of family values *vis-à-vis* Canadian core values, some of the second-generation Canadian Bengalis were utterly frank in demonstrating the piercing pathos of the situation.

As a presenter and as an audience member for the other presenters, I consider myself fortunate to have been a part of this conference, which will be a part of the historiography of the migration of the Bengalis in Canada. We owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Zaman for her vision and readiness to document a part of Canada's demographic and social history in which there currently exists a large gap.

MY COMMENTS, QUESTIONS, AND OBSERVATIONS

How are Bengali Canadians, having constructed and selected their notion of *who they are*, practicing their ideologies in their country of adoption (or in their country of birth, as is the case with second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin)?

On the second day of the conference, it became clear how the second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin select, negotiate, and communicate the intersectionalities of their identity in Canada. Simply put: *how do they go about defining their multiple identities?*

One of the greatest problems I see in this area is the non-availability of migration/immigration data which Professor Zaman had already talked about. In fact, it is specifically for this reason that she had taken the initiative to organize this conference. Historically speaking, all Bengalis who came to Canada prior to 1947 came with an Indian passport. In the immigration records, there was no breakdown by province (such as West Bengal) or language (such as Bengali-speaking). Following the creation of Pakistan, Bengalis of East Pakistan who came to Canada had entered as *Pakistanis* (with no breakdown of linguistic background, such as Bengalis, or geographic background, such as East or West Pakistan). In fact, it is only from 1972 onwards that we have a record of the arrival of Bangladeshis in Canada. The Bengalis from West Bengal still come with an Indian passport, and Canadian immigration records designate them as *Indians* as opposed to Bengali-speaking Indians. This means that past immigrations records now in the archives do not assist us in any way in determining the number of Bengali-speaking immigrants arriving from India or Pakistan. The present Canadian Census is the only source for determining the current number of Bengalis in Canada since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The present migration of Bengalis from India (or the State of Bangla, formerly West Bengal) is problematic since, as mentioned, there is no data under the category *Bengalis*.

In tracing the history of and reasons for migration, it is necessary to look into the fact of immigration to Canada by Bengalis of West Bengal or Bangladesh through another lens. Reasons for migration include emigration for economic gain and flight to Canada to escape political and religious persecution. The "push/pull" concept may be used to explain in part *why* Bangladeshis immigrate to Canada in large numbers – how they are *pulled* to Canada by the lure of a higher standard of living, and by employment and educational opportunities. This is something that many presenters talked about. This discussion may assist us in determining the reason for migration, but not the number of Bengali-speaking migrants from India and Pakistan. For my forthcoming book entitled *Canada's Role in the Emergence of Bangladesh*, I have conducted extensive research on the migration of Pakistanis (Bengalis and non-Bengalis) since 1947. I may therefore be able to assist the research team in this matter.

Professor Zaman may *explore the possibility of creating a taskforce to look into collecting immigration data from those who are still around*. This may be possible by

working with families that still have the memories of their senior members – about their arrival, struggles, and subsequent settlement. The *oral history project* method is a common historical research method that may assist us in creating a database for the future. The sooner this is done, the easier it will be for all of us to collect documentation for future historical research in the area of Bengalis' migration to Canada.

One important point that became clear from the presentations by the second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin is how the social and political identity of individuals can be changed, and how people can adjust their identity in accordance with their situation. Having listened attentively to the presentations of a few second-generation Bengali Canadians, I came away with the message that *ethnicity is something that is being negotiated and constructed in everyday living*. In a changed situation, some of the common characteristics of an ethnic identity that may be relevant in some places may not be appropriate in other places. Through a follow-up dialogue with the second-generation Bengali Canadians, Professor Zaman can engage them in studying *how they select the strategies to find some common characteristics with other persons or groups and how they establish solidarity with some people and distinguish themselves from others*.

Since there was quite a bit of discussion on the *challenges faced by Bengali immigrants*, it would be necessary to focus in on the exact nature of the barriers and the ways in which these are being overcome. It is gratifying to hear how some professionals have been addressing this and assisting many other professionals by steering them along the fastest path to upgrading their education and obtaining equivalencies. Further discourse may assist us in obtaining a fuller understanding of the problem of *foreign credential recognition* and recognition of "*portable skills*" (i.e., skills that may be used in Canada regardless of where they were picked up and honed) across the country.

Again, although the second-generation Bengali Canadians who have studied in Canada generally don't face this problem, they often face subtle and covert racial or systemic discrimination. Well-structured dialogue with the second-generation Bengalis, facilitated by experts in the field, would generate some fruitful discussion on this problem. The outcome of their discussions may be shared with others to incorporate into their job-search strategy.

There was quite a bit of discussion related to the importance of *the retention of language, culture, and religion* that is evident in the ways in which Bengali Canadians have formed various associations and groups to assert their *collective identity* as Canadians of Bengali origin. Needless to say, the two-day conference merely pointed out the gravity of this matter. Research must be undertaken in this area involving Bengalis (both first- and second-generation) to conduct a comprehensive study of this phenomenon.

Since immigrants, whether first-, second-, or even third-generation Bengalis, are *always seen as "immigrants"* simply due to the colour of their skin, it is imperative to conduct studies on how a mainstream Canadian *perceives* a visible minority Canadian. *Perception*, regardless of other facts, continues to play a vital role in the eyes of the mainstream Canadians who continue to see the children and grandchildren of immigrants as "*immigrants*." This is not the case with the Caucasian immigrants whose children and grandchildren are instantly seen as members of the *mainstream Canadian* group; no questions are ever asked about their country of origin. Given that this will continue to *exist perpetually* in people's minds, it is essential that research be undertaken to determine *how a harmonious racial relationship could be established* among Caucasian and non-Caucasian

Canadians. Those who presented their papers from a diverse point of view may again be engaged to conduct further research on the *phenomenon of race, ethnicity, and identity* in order to enhance our understanding of race and race-related phenomena.

Another important fact worth mentioning that became evident during the two-day conference is the fact that Bengali Canadians, despite all odds and insurmountable difficulties, devote their time to doing various types of *voluntary work*. Their *determination to do voluntary work* remains paramount. Many presenters mentioned how Bengali Canadians, regardless of their age, juggle their schedules and manage to find some time to volunteer. Both first- and second-generation Bengalis clearly stated in their presentations the phenomenon of *volunteerism* that is inherent in their minds. This area of their lives may be looked at by researchers to gain an expanded understanding of their *cumulative pride, energy, and enterprise* and incorporated to demonstrate their ongoing contribution to Canada, the country they call “home.” A narrative history of this phenomenon would be one way to counter negative stereotypes regarding visible minorities, who would then be seen as contributors to Canada’s pluralism.

The next area that may be explored is the area of accomplishment and tangible progress that has been made by Canadians of Bengali origin. These narratives may be placed under the heading of *success stories – how Bengali Canadians are contributing to Canada in their respective field of endeavours*. There were references to the accomplishments of Bengalis in several fields: education and teaching, medicine, law, business enterprise, management, the hospitality industry, provincial civil service, and federal public service. Over the years, on numerous occasions, many of Bengali Canadians have received *recognition awards* from their workplaces. Taking this fact into account, a historical narrative may be produced to demonstrate *how Bengalis are a part of the Canadian mosaic and how they are recognized for their outstanding achievements*. Such demonstration of the level of success and prominence of Bengali Canadians may also be a *source of inspiration* for the next generation of Bengalis, allowing the older generation to serve as “role models” for members of the younger generation who are pursuing their own career goals. In fact, I believe this will form a part of the historical narrative of the migration of Bengalis and their settlement and subsequent contribution to Canada. Since this would be based on authentic history, it would also constitute the diasporic historiography for future research in the area of Bengali Canadians.

Personally, I would consider myself privileged if, in any way, I am given an opportunity to engage myself in documenting the history and contribution of Bengali Canadians in this historical narrative.