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"ARE YOU A BENGALI OR ARE YOU AN INDIAN?" BENGALIS IN CANADA

1. PREAMBLE

I will begin with a small personal anecdote that will explain the title of this paper: "Are you a Bengali or are you an Indian?" My mother is a retired adult educator in Toronto and had students from all ethnic backgrounds in her classes. One student once asked her, "Are you a *Bangali* or are you an Indian? Needless to say, my mother was perplexed with the question, as she was both *Bangali* and an Indian. The student who asked this question was a newcomer from Bangladesh and had assumed that since my mother was not from Bangladesh, she was not a *Bangali*, but was rather an Indian. For the student originally from Bangladesh, her national (or trans-national) identity was synonymous with her ethnic identity based in her mother tongue, *Bangla*. My mother's national identity and her ethnic identity as *Bangali* are not mutually exclusive but rather simultaneous. Which one she allies herself with at any given time depends on the context and who is asking. Among a group of Bengali-speaking people, she would identify herself as a *Bangali*, whereas among a group of people originating in India, she would identify herself as an Indian unless they were curious about her exact origin. In fact, most of the time in a mixed Indian setting, you end up identifying yourself as both a *Bangali* and an Indian.

The encounter between my mother and her student showed that even though they shared a common ethnic origin, common ethnic history up to 1947, a common language and a common culture, there are differences due to their national identities and histories of their respective nations of origin. Although we speak Bengali and trace our ethnic origins to Bengal, we may speak with different dialects; West Bengalis are predominantly Hindus, while Bangladeshis are predominantly Muslims, and this has historically been a significant issue dividing us. Nevertheless, we do have a lot in common, and it is my hope that this conference, which has brought all of us together, will help us to forge a solidarity that can be formed out of acknowledging our differences while building on our commonalities for the future. In this paper, I raise some issues around Bengali identity within the Canadian context based on secondary theoretical literature as well as a few references to Statistics Canada data.

2. WHO IS A BENGALI?

The question of identity is complex because the answer implicates not only how we identify ourselves but also how others identify us. Thus, it is both personal and externally imposed. Moreover, how we identify ourselves is very much influenced by how we see others

identifying us – how they include or exclude us. Thus, the sense of "self" and of "other" are intimately connected. When I refer to "others," I do not refer to one set of people only. "Others" could be "other Bengalis"; it could be "other Canadians"; or, it could be the Canadian/Indian and Bangladeshi states which produce identity documents, such as landed immigration papers and passports. Some states, such as Bangladesh, allow dual citizenship (although limited to certain countries), while others don't. India recognizes dual nationality but not dual citizenship (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), which means you cannot carry two different passports as an Indian but the OCI (Overseas Citizenship of India) provides some legal and travelling privileges.

Ethnic identities (both subjective and legal) are molded by many factors, such as where our ancestors came from, where we were born, what language we speak and also a sense of imagination. Benedict Anderson (1983) wrote that a nation is an "imaginary community" so that even people who have never met each other but live in a common land share a common bond because of a belief that they share something in common. They share a sense of "being" the same. Ethnic identity can also refer to a sense of shared "beingness," a sense of shared knowledge. When I asked my mother what or who a Bengali is, she said:

Bengalis come from a land of many large rivers. As the turbulent waters rush down through the low lying plains, the water often destroys one bank and creates the other. For ages, the people of these regions have moved from bank to bank, building homes, settling to grow rice in these fertile alluvial plains. Vegetation is lush, so fruits and vegetables can be grown here and rivers yield plenty of sweet water fish. This land of rivers that we imagine in our minds has produced many songs, poetry, philosophical insights, stories and art. These have formed who we are. Apart from the rich *bhatiali* songs sung by boatmen and women, the people in these lands have enjoyed a freedom symbolized by the native culture of *Bauls* and *Boiragis* who sang about the spiritual unity of human beings, life and death, and other common experiences beyond caste and creed. Countless writers, too many to mention here, have written poems, short stories and essays. Our most well-known poets, Kobiguru Rabindranath Thakur and Kazi Nazrul Islam, also wrote about the fundamental unity of all human beings regardless of who they are, what language they speak or what religion they followed. We Bengalis are the lucky people who have inherited this great wealth of beauty, creativity and intellectual tradition.

If we deconstruct how my mother developed this sense of "being Bengali," we can probably connect it to many essays and poems she has read, to geographical and historical texts and to stories she has heard from her ancestors. Indeed, in many Bengali texts, Bengali identity is connected to the riverine geography of the place called Bengal through which flow Ganga (or Ganges) on the west, Bhramaputra on the east and Tista in the centre, all three flowing down from the top of the Himalayas in the north and emptying into the Bay of Bengal in the south. The Ganga flows along the western border of Bangladesh (the eastern border of West Bengal in India) becoming the river Hooghli in the west and the river Padma (or Podda) in the east. In Bangladesh, Bhramaputra joins the Tista River to become Jamuna. The waters of Jamuna eventually meet the Meghna River before emptying into the Bay of Bengal and forming the largest delta in the world, known as the Ganges-Bhramaputra Delta. Our ethnic identity comes from this physical and geographical place.

Academically speaking, identities are related to "being," "feeling" and "doing" (Malhi, Boon and Rogers 2009). Identity as a form of "being" refers to an essentialist or biological given, where one's identity is not questioned and is marked on the body as an

"appearance." On the other hand, "doing" an identity refers to practices associated with one's identity, such as speaking a certain language or maintaining certain food restrictions due to religion or culture, wearing a particular dress and so on. Lastly, "feeling" a certain identity refers to a private identity as opposed to a publicly assigned identity. What my mother expressed was her sense of "being," "feeling" and "doing" Bengali. However, in the context of India, West Bengalis share a sense of "being" and "feeling" Bengali as well as Indian, as my mother's perplexed reaction to her student demonstrated.

As I mentioned before, however, expressing an identity publically is very much influenced by our assigned identity. In our countries of birth, if we are members of dominant classes, castes or groups, we are unequivocally recognized as nationals. On the other hand, if we are minorities or members of subordinate classes or groups, our assigned identity may be questioned. This is true in terms of our identity here in Canada as well. Although socially and legally speaking, we who hold PR (Permanent Resident) cards or Canadian passports are all Canadians, are we seen as such by people on the streets, in our workplaces and in our schools? How does that make us feel? Do we ourselves identify as "Canadian," or do we see ourselves as set apart from "Canadians"? What do race, ethnicity and culture have to do with it? If we were white, would others feel differently about us and would we in turn feel differently about ourselves? Identities are fluid, multiple, contextual, multi-layered, relational and power-based. If I think of my own identity, I would identify myself as "Canadian" on official documents, at the border and internationally if I am travelling. I would identify myself as an Indian among Indians, as a Bengali Canadian in this room, as a South Asian Canadian among a multicultural/multiracial group of Canadians and as a South Asian woman in a multicultural group of women. Thus, the way I identify myself has a lot to do with how I see myself located in relation to others in the room, how I want to present myself to others in the room, who I want to connect with and what I want to tell them about myself. I have often wondered how I would identify myself to an Indigenous Canadian, whether I would introduce myself as "the other Indian," from the other land mass that had been encountered by another European explorer and which had subsequently been colonized by the same European colonizers, or whether I would introduce myself as a newcomer to "his" or "her" country, Canada. How would this Indigenous person view me, as a "guest" or as an "intruder"? Identity is not only "private" and "personal"; it is also social and political.

Our identity as "being" Bengali comes from a shared history. Our knowledge that Bangladeshis and West Bengali Indians have a shared and yet separate history requires us to understand British colonialism in India and the fight against it. We need to know the stories of how Bengalis came together as a group to fight British colonialism and simultaneously developed separate identities on the basis of religion and class during this process. We need to understand that, under a colonial yoke, the British were able to surely but steadily accentuate religious differences and tensions through various policies and actions. When the first Bengal Partition was orchestrated in 1905 by then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, as a central enactment of divide and rule policies, Bengalis of all religions united against it and the British were forced to remove it after six years of Bengalis fighting for freedom from it. The resistance to colonial rule was intense, incessant, complex and bloody; my generation of Indian Bengalis in post-independence India grew up with stories, songs and enactments of this resistance. The people of Bangladesh fought for freedom once again during the independence movement of 1971 and even decades before through the Bengali

language movement. Remembering this history is part of enacting our identity, thereby affirming it.

Our identity as Bengalis is deeply entwined with our mother tongue, *Bangla.* Speaking, writing and reading the Bengali language are some of the most significant ways of performing or "doing" Bengali identity. When we meet another Bengali, we can't wait to break out into speaking *Bangla.* The sound of it is music to our ears. So prized is the Bengali language to the Bengali people that when the state of West Pakistan declared Urdu to be the one and only official language of the state, students of Dhaka University openly defied the law by public protest on February 21, 1952 and got shot by police and became martyrs. Although many were killed, it catalyzed a protracted Bengali language movement until the government was forced to recognize it as an official language in 1956. It had reverberations internationally when UNESCO recognized February 21 as Mother Language Day. In 2015, BC and Manitoba officially designated February 21 as Mother Language Day and it served as a galvanizing point for many members of the Bangladeshi community in these provinces. Edmonton has also recognized the day. The establishment of *Bangla* classes as part of the heritage language programs through Boards of Education has also been important in terms of passing on the Bengali language inter-generationally.

So far, I have mentioned common ancestry in the riverine region of Bengal, a shared history of anti-colonial struggle and a shared mother tongue as being fundamental to our Bengali identity. Yet our relationship to these things is influenced by when we migrated to Canada, how old we were when we came here, whether we were born here, how often we have visited our countries of origin, the degree of transnational ties we possess and so on. Many Bengalis have inter-married with non-Bengalis and non-South Asians and have acquired a much more fluid and hybrid identity. Further, do we still identify as Bengalis if we were born here in Canada? What about if we are of mixed ethnic/racial heritage? Would we identify as Bengalis if we were not fluent in Bengali? It is for this reason that the need to preserve the "doing" of Bengali culture through various practices, most importantly speaking *Bangla,* is often fraught with tensions for parents who are raising children in diaspora. An Indian Bengali mother I was interviewing said that she makes it her business to make sure her children get a daily dose of Bengali culture. She shared:

> I make sure that I listen to Rabindra Sangeet[1] twice a day…expose children to Bengali movies and dances, even if they don't like it, some of it will register. We go to KaliBari[2] regularly…. At home I do Saraswati Puja.[3] We try to give them exposure, but their capacity to take it is limited…. We eat Indian food totally [being against fast food for health reasons], but being a Bengali, the children don't eat fish. They eat Dal-Bhhat.[4] They wear Indian clothes while visiting friends' homes or going to the Puja…. Every two years, we go to India…parents are coming…phone India every week…. We talk to the children about our family, keep them updated. Send e-mails sometimes, although phones are better. Every weekend, we meet our friends, about eight or nine families. We celebrate

[1] Songs of the Nobel prize-winning poet from Bengal, Rabindra Nath Thakur.
[2] Temple of the goddess, Kali, whose following among Bengalis is marked in a big way.
[3] Worshipping the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati.
[4] Rice and lentils, a staple diet in many parts of India and Pakistan.

> important occasions at home with friends…try and do it for them [i.e., the children].

As we can see, considerable work is being performed by this mother to inculcate Bengali Hindu values and cultural practices, i.e., performing Bengali identity and creating a sense of Bengali community for her children. Scholars (Handa 2003; Bannerji 2000; Anthias 1998) have written on how the work of maintaining ethnic identity falls squarely on the shoulders of mothers in immigrant families and adds to their workload, sometimes with negative health effects. Additionally, if the children don't internalize "Bengaliness," it is often seen as the woman's failure. Yet this kind of regimented "Bengali training" often inculcates a formulaic notion of Bengali culture, only emphasizing the performative aspect of it rather than the "feeling" part of it, and can also be exclusionary. What if someone does not "do" any of these things, for instance cannot eat fish because they are scared of the bones, cannot speak or appreciate Rabindra Sangeet and moreover is non-religious? Does that make them a "bad" Bengali? This reminds me of my daughter's experience when she approached a Bengali students' association in university with the intention of joining them. She was rejected as not qualifying for the association. Even though her mother is Bengali-speaking and she herself speaks the language haltingly, she does have a non-Bengali father and a non-Bengali last name. Thus, she did not fulfill the requirements of "being" Bengali. She was excluded.

It is interesting that when Statistics Canada asked Canadians to identify their "ethnic origin," those who marked "Bangladeshi" (a little more than 20,000) did not necessarily mark "Bengali" as an ethnicity since less than 10,000 indicated that. Additionally, it is worth noting that since there were 24,595 Bangladeshi Canadians in 2006, not everyone within the community indicated their "ethnic origin" as Bangladeshi. Presumably, those who are of multiple ethnicities may not have. Nonetheless, most Bangladeshis noted their "national identity" as their "ethnic identity," rather than their linguistic identity. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing how West Bengalis from India responded to this question because there was no "West Bengali" category provided to tick off; West Bengali Indians are likely to have marked "East Indian" or "South Asian." Thus, the provision of certain categories by statisticians can also skew how individuals fill out Census forms. To a certain extent, it seems that Statistics Canada had conflated "national" and "ethnic identity." The charts on the next page show the results from the 2006 Census.

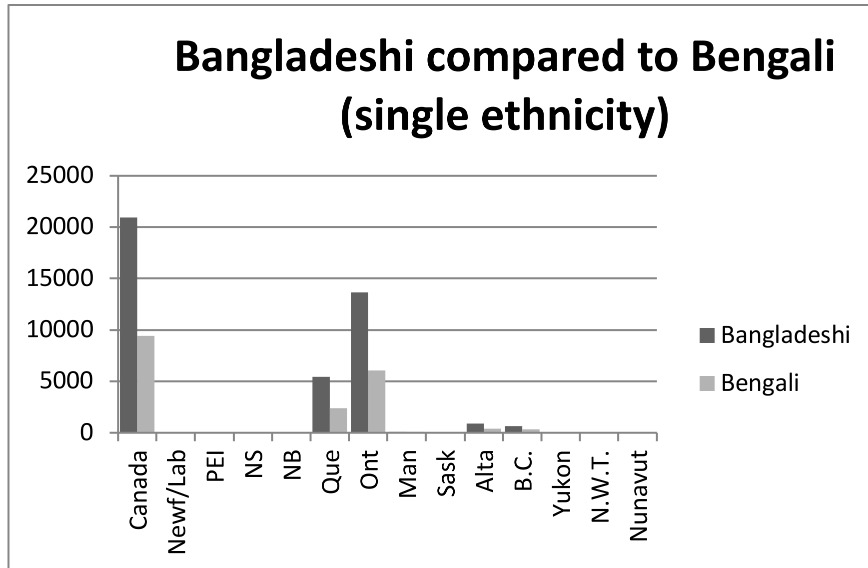

Chart 1: Number of Bengalis and Bangladeshis in Canada
Source: Statistics Canada 2006

These numbers can be contrasted with the number of "Bengali speakers". According to the 2006 Census, there were 48,075 Bengali-speaking people in Canada in that year.[5]

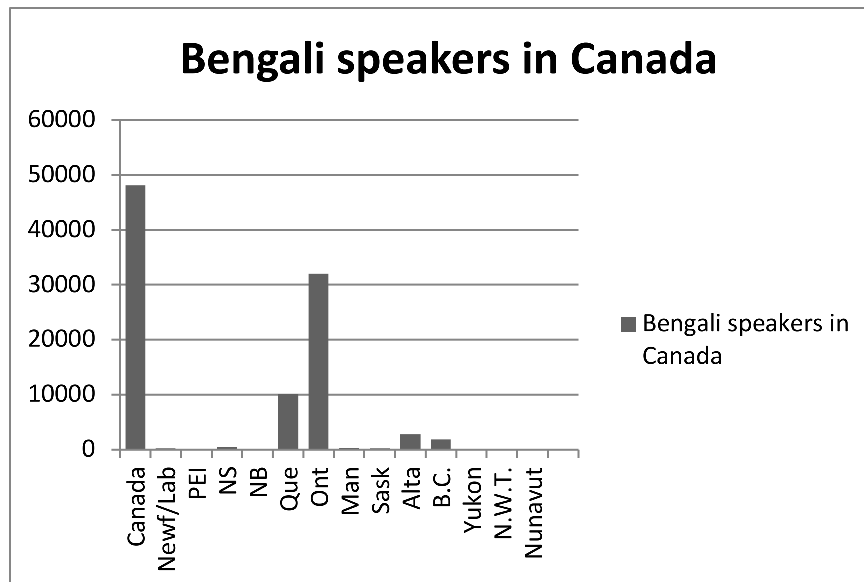

Chart 2: Number of Bengali Speakers in Canada
Source: Statistics Canada 2006

[5] More recent information from 2011 shows that the Bengali-speaking population has increased from 48,075 in 2006 to 58,895 in 2011.

Earlier, I mentioned that our identities are also informed by how we see others viewing us and treating us. Related to that, identity can also form as a reaction or resistance to negative portrayals or actions. We saw how Bengalis came together in 1905 when Lord Curzon attempted to divide Bengal. We saw how Bengalis were galvanized together when the Bengali language was marginalized in what is now Bangladesh. In a multicultural nation such as Canada, we are officially encouraged to preserve and practice our ethnic heritage and practices, but only those aspects that will be "tolerated" by the official mainstream society. In addition, we can continue our practices and speak our languages in private. In other words, they are not "official" languages as English and French are. Moreover, there is the constant saturation of racism in which non-whites are seen as the "other," juxtaposed as outsiders to "Canadians," who are read as "whites." In the post-9/11 period, religion has been added to the equation, so that if you are Muslim, as most Bangladeshis and many Indians are, you are seen not only as the "other" but also as a potential threat to the nation. How do we as non-Christians and as non-whites define ourselves within that context? How is our culture viewed within that kind of mindset?

A number of identity responses have been noted in academic studies when people are marginalized due to race, religion or class. Glick Schiller and Fouron (2001) have shown that long distance nationalism, i.e., "identification with a particular, existing state or the desire to construct a new state" (23), is nurtured when people of colour are subjected to racism abroad. Long distance nationalism was evident among Indian Bengali migrants in North America when India was still under British colonial rule. A number of young Bengali freedom fighters who had become self-exiled, along with their compatriots from other parts of India, notably Punjab, operated long distance in their quest for freedom from foreign rule. Their anti-colonial fervor and long distance nationalism was redoubled when they encountered a virulently racist environment in North America. One example of that was the enactment of the Continuous Journey Stipulation in 1908, according to which Indians (now South Asians) could land in Canada only by continuous journey rather than by touching on any other ports. Since ships did not operate through continuous journey from India to Canada, it was a roundabout way of preventing Indians from landing in Canada. Moreover, they had to pay a landing fee of $200 each, which would have been a fortune in Indian currency at that time, while European immigrants had to pay $25 each (Caron 2016; Sohi 2011).

In defiance of the Continuous Journey Stipulation, a shipload of 376 Indians on board the *Komagatamaru* (KGM),[6] mainly Sikhs, led by Gurdit Singh, arrived in Canada on May 23, 1914 (Sohi 2011) after a month-long sail from Hong Kong, but the ship was prevented from docking at the Vancouver port and its occupants denied food and water. Members from the Canadian Sikh organizations in Vancouver strategized as to how to bring the people onshore, but to no avail. Moreover, the passengers were labeled as anti-British agitators. After two months, they were forced to return back to the port in Budge Budge, near Kolkata, and there was a confrontation there with the British colonial army who had planned to send them off to Punjab. While 62 agreed to be transported to Punjab, the rest, led by Gurdit Singh, confronted the British army resulting in 20 being killed. Some managed to escape and were scattered.

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[6] The KGM was one among other challenges to such immigration stipulations (Sohi 2011).

Among others, *Kabiguru* Rabindranath Thakur protested this tragedy by declining several invitations to visit Canada (Mukherjee-Reed 2011; O'Connell and Unsal n.d.). When he did visit much later, in April 1929, to address the Triennial Conference of the National Education Association, he made it a point to deliver a speech at the Gurudwara on 2nd Avenue in Vancouver to express solidarity with the Sikhs who constituted the majority of South Asians in Canada (O'Connell and Unsal n.d.). On that occasion, he said: "Canada must believe in great ideals. She will have to solve…the most difficult of all problems, the race problem" (quoted in Mukerjee-Reed 2011).[7] Sohi (2011) states that when the Indian Bengali exiles saw the racial and class inequalities heaped on the Asian diasporas as well as on African-Americans in the USA, they began to see through the hypocrisy of its stated goal of equality and fraternity.[8] They could see a global system of racism and social injustice operating in different parts of the world in tandem.

Taraknath Das was one such long distance freedom fighter in exile in the USA and, for a while, at the border in Vancouver, Canada. Sohi (2011) writes that Taraknath, originally from Kolkata and educated in what is now Bangladesh, claimed refugee status in the USA and initially worked as a labourer (as laundry assistant and then janitor) and then as a lab assistant at the University of California at Berkeley, where he also enrolled as a special student in Chemistry mentored by a professor of the Medical school (Mukherjee 1997). He also established the Indian Independence League with Sikh labourers in San Francisco and taught them English and American history so that they could pass the naturalization tests. Taraknath subsequently passed the civil service examination and was hired as an American interpreter and posted in Vancouver, BC. He informally coached Indians in Canada on their rights and advocated for those who were detained at the border. Following an anti-Asian riot in 1907, Taraknath started organizing a Hindusthani Association to fight for the rights of Sikh immigrants. It was in Vancouver also that Taraknath edited an English newspaper titled the *Free Hindusthan*, first published in April 1908 (South Asian American Digital Archive 2017). Canadian officials were made aware that exclusion of Indians would result in "revolt in India" (Mukherjee 1997). Although Taraknath was an exemplary employee, he was given a choice by his American employer to either keep his job as an interpreter or stop publishing the newspaper. He chose to quit his job and continued his educational work among Sikh labour camps in lumber mills in BC through what became known as the Millside School, near New Westminster (Mukherjee 1997).

Glick Schiller and Fouron (2001) differentiate "long distance nationalism" from the notion of "diaspora," which is a second type of response to marginalization, in which racialized communities may develop a common bond and a sense of community on the basis of having a common origin and/or being subjected to oppression, marginalization, violence or even exile but there is no desire to build a new state. A prominent theme in the literature on diaspora is that resistance to domination is essential to the development of collectivities that span geographical boundaries, for example the development of the "Black" diaspora during and after the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Gilroy 1987; Clifford 1994;

[7] Just recently, Justin Trudeau apologized on behalf of the Canadian government to the South Asian community for the blatant act of racial exclusion in the *Komagatamaru* case (Husser 2016).

[8] I have not found any indication of their knowledge about the colonialism perpetrated on the Indigenous Peoples of North America.

Moghissi, Rahnema and Goodman 2009). In Canada, in the face of rampant "Paki bashing" on the streets and public spaces of Toronto in the early 1970s, a "South Asian" diaspora developed, bringing together immigrants whose origins lay in different countries of South Asia. This collective identity went beyond national affiliation and religion and provided an opportunity for collective organizing, creating collective structures for lobbying and for commercial pursuits. However, scholars and practitioners are divided over the contemporary salience of the term. Being "South Asian" may have shifted in recent decades in response to Islamophobia. After 9/11, Moghissi et al. (2009) have suggested a greater adherence to Muslim rather than "South Asian" affiliation among immigrants from Muslim majority countries, including Bangladesh.

Moreover, diasporic identities may silence subordinate groups within communities. Ghosh (2013), in the Canadian context, problematizes the "South Asian" identity as an externally imposed post-colonial product, which overlooks diversity among sub-national groups. Anand (2009) observes the need to hear the silenced voices within the "South Asian" diaspora. Avtar Brah (1996) adds that all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we." Similarly, Shamita Das Gupta (1998) has pointed to geo-political tensions within the term "South Asia." Sundar (2007) confirms the challenges of building solidarity as "South Asians" in Canada. Chew (2015) refers to racism she faced as a mixed race person within the "South Asian community."

A third response to the experience of racism in an immigrant-receiving country is what Portes (2001) refers to as "reactive ethnicity," which refers to immigrants developing an accentuated ethnic identity. For example, Moghissi et al. (2009) have written about "a new enthusiasm for 'Islam' among some diaspora youth" (14). They write that this enthusiasm comes from a need for support and a sense of belonging in a climate where they are subjected to racialized exclusion and hostility. Nagra (2011) has developed the concept of "reactive identity formation" to explain increased religiosity among young Muslim youth in Canada following 9/11 as a way of responding to discrimination. Despite the great diversity among Muslims, an Islamic diaspora has developed in Canada.

A subordinate "class position" can also produce a reactive identity. Research shows that racialized immigrants who are in marginalized positions in the labour market develop a reactive transnational identity where they lack a sense of belonging in their country of residence (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Portes 2010). Discrimination faced by racialized immigrants in the Canadian labour market can also contribute to such an identity. Consider some facts on Bangladeshis in the Canadian labour market and ponder whether these might shape identity. According to the 2006 National Household Survey (NHS), about 78% of Bangladeshi Canadian men and women were earning less than $30,000, which was the Low Income Cut-Off (poverty line) for a family of four. Ornstein's (2006) and Ghosh's (2007: 125-131) studies of the Toronto Census Metropolitan Authority (CMA) using 2006 data confirm what the NHS data showed. Bangladeshi men and women are highly represented in accommodation and food services, manufacturing, and retail trade (in which women surpass men), precarious sectors with low incomes and lack of unionization. Men, more than women, are present in professional, scientific and technical services, and transportation and warehousing. Women surpass men in healthcare and social assistance jobs. Overall, we can see that the distribution of occupations and jobs among Bangladeshi men and women are not only gendered but also

racialized. An intriguing finding by Ornstein (2006) is that Bangladeshi men earned an average of "$32,500 even though 19.1% are employed in professional occupations; and their income is much lower than the 'Punjabi and Sikh group,' 41.9% of whose members are in less skilled manual occupations" (53). It could be that even the professional Bangladeshi men are engaged in precarious work, marked by part-time, temporary or contract work, which could account for their low income. Akbar (2016) argues that self-employment, which involves close to 1000 men and women in the Bangladeshi community, is not only a way of coping with downward social mobility but also a place in which women can negotiate identities of gender, race, class and religion.

Some of the Bangladeshis Ghosh (2007) interviewed talked extensively about racism in the labour market, particularly Islamophobia. One person discussed his belief that when prospective employers see his Muslim name, they are apt to discount his applications. The non-recognition of education and professional degrees from Bangladesh, the resulting underemployment of professionals, and requirement for "Canadian experience" at the point of hiring have been corroborated by other studies (Ahmed 1993; Bengali Information and Employment Services 2013) and are indications of systemic racism.

3. CONCLUSION

Although Bengalis in Canada have come a long way from the days of Taraknath Das and the Continuous Journey Stipulation of 1908 in that we are granted landing status and citizenship, we are still way behind white Canadians in the labour market and in society at large due to systemic discrimination and racism. In the post-9/11 age, if you're Muslim, you are vulnerable to Islamophobia. Given this larger context, is it in our interest to see ourselves narrowly as Bengali-speaking, or even more narrowly, as Hindu Bengalis, Muslim Bengalis or Christian Bengalis, or even more narrowly by caste, sub-caste or sect, or do we identify more broadly, connecting with those who may have similar experiences and struggles, beyond the Bengali fold? Halder (2012: 290) notes that Canadian multiculturalism policy as it has been narrowly interpreted has created "'political reserves' for immigrants in Canada," in keeping with its colonial policies regarding Indigenous Peoples. Of course, it must be recognized that as they pertain to Indigenous Peoples in Canada, reserves have most significantly involved land expropriation, forced displacement and containment, whereas for racialized immigrants, "psychic reserves" have been created through the systemic proliferation of separate ethnic enclaves and rigid identities.

On the positive side, Bengali Canadians have developed tremendous cultural capital, networks, resources, skills and knowhow required to accomplish things in their own communities and home-away-from-home here in Canada, as seen in their institutionally complete neighbourhoods such as *Bangla town* in Toronto, or their transnational cultural events such as Annual Bengali conferences and *Durga Pujas,* attracting thousands. Sadly, our "community" participation has largely been on narrow religious and cultural fronts and I fear that forces are afoot globally and locally to make our horizons even narrower. Nurturing our own culture feels good, and creating community, drawing boundaries around ourselves and affirming our ethnic identity is understandable, especially in an often hostile and alienating environment, but it can simultaneously contribute to building

boundaries between ourselves and others based on region, religion, language, race, caste, class, generation and political membership that become rigid, parochial and patriarchal and reproduce inequalities and tensions. The choice is before us: do we want to stay forever as passive "outsiders within," drawing exclusionary boundaries around ourselves and celebrating our cultural lives within narrow confines, or do we want to proceed in the Bengali tradition of Taraknath Das and Rabindranath Thakur who were proud Bengalis but who utilized Bengali traditions of freedom and universalism to join others to achieve dignity and justice? I end with a few of my favorite lines from *Kabiguru* Rabindranath Thakur:

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
> Where knowledge is free
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
> By narrow domestic walls
> Where words come out from the depth of truth
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
> Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
> Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
> Where the mind is led forward by thee
> Into ever-widening thought and action
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

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