

IN PURSUIT OF OUR DREAMS

1. THE DIFFICULT DECISION TO LEAVE

Our decision to immigrate to Canada was made in a very uncontrived, lacklustre manner. There wasn't any strong, sure desire to immigrate. Prior to our immigration, my husband Rabiul and I both had good steady jobs, lived in a desirable part of the capital city in our home country of Bangladesh and were surrounded by a close-knit network of caring family and friends. Our decision to uproot our lives and immigrate to a foreign place grew out of a spontaneous urge to follow the road map of our lives, which led us away from the country where we had been born and had lived and loved.

This road map emerged slowly and stealthily, marked by coincidental happenings beginning with a small newspaper article. A friend of mine showed us a newspaper clipping that her husband had sent from the Middle East, about Canada opening its doors to new immigrants. That clipping from a far-away land stirred within us a sense of curiosity and wonder about a potential life in Canada, and in doing so initiated a series of events that changed the course of our lives.

Almost on a whim, we applied for a Canadian visa, not expecting the immigration process to start or end very soon. To our surprise, our application to immigrate under the individual category was readily accepted. The principal applicant was Rabiul who, being a naval architect, was eligible to apply since Canada had a need for his professional skills. Subsequently, we were called for an interview, did our medical assessments and within a year and half, the immigration visa IMM1000 was in our hands.

It was during this time that we were faced with the daunting question of whether or not to make the big move. To uproot ourselves from a secure and familiar place and transplant ourselves to an unknown, far-away land was a difficult undertaking. The only justifiable reason to immigrate was the future of our two girls, who were only three and four years old at the time. It was hard to imagine raising a family amidst the socio-political unrest and insecurity that plagued our home country at that time.

Bangladesh in the 1980s was going through a growth spurt, and still stabilizing itself after the devastating and wasteful war of 1971, which had decimated human lives and shattered the country's infrastructure. Dhaka, the capital city, was overly crowded, with hordes of people moving in from rural areas and other parts of the country in search of jobs, security and shelter. The country's economic condition and sense of law and order were shrouded in uncertainty. For example, if one ventured out for work or any other reason, returning home safely was always a concern. Being hit by a reckless truck driver or attacked by a hijacker was a common phenomenon. There seemed to be a desire on the part of those who could leave the country to settle elsewhere. We were at a crossroads, and

our decision to immigrate was ultimately made for us by the country's unsettled political and socio-economic condition.

Although the country was experiencing considerable social change and economic uncertainty during this time, both Rabiul and I were fortunate to have stable and fulfilling careers during our early married life in Dhaka. I worked as an Assistant Immigration Officer for the Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh. It was a very interesting, satisfying and well-paying job. I loved the job's intricacies and the application of diplomacy and investigative methods. Being a "people person," I flourished in this job and got glowing evaluations every year. Although to the outside world it seemed like I had a great deal of power and authority as an insider in the immigration department, in reality, the sole authority of granting a visitor or immigration visa was in the hands of the Immigration Officer, who had come from Canada to take the job. Rabiul was likewise flourishing in his job as a naval architect. His job involved designing ships, ordering work, going on inspections and overseeing delivery of ships, tugboats and commercial marine vehicles. He worked for the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), where he easily moved up the ranks to a senior position after joining the organization soon after graduating from BUET, a reputed engineering university in Bangladesh. With both Rabiul and I working in secure, reputable positions early in our careers, the decision to immigrate was motivated less by the desire to accelerate our own career potential and more by the desire to provide future opportunities abroad for our daughters.

Prior to my marriage, I had experienced life abroad as a Master's student in the United States, when I had lived, worked and studied in Minnesota. After completing my Master's degree at the University of Minnesota, I returned to Bangladesh, got married, had children and began gradually reverting to the Bangladeshi roots I had left behind. My six-year sojourn from home meant I was now required to make many adjustments to conform to the real and imagined pressure of social norms and expectations in my home country. Despite these adjustments, I began to enjoy the comforts of life in Dhaka. Being surrounded by loving family and friends, and having more than one maid for household help and a driver at my beck and call were luxuries that I began to enjoy and get used to after my lonely, sub-standard student life in the USA. The agony of a lonely, hard life in a foreign country, no matter how developed, was still very fresh in my mind, so the thought of immigrating to Canada was not very appealing. However, Rabiul's wish to settle abroad was pretty strong. Most of his friends had either obtained jobs or gained admission to universities and colleges in the USA, Canada or elsewhere, and he too wanted to avail himself of the opportunity to move. Thus, with hope and prayers in our hearts as we faced the uncertainty ahead, we decided to move to Canada in 1988.

2. EARLY EXPERIENCES IN CANADA

To make the moving process more manageable and make sure we entered Canada before the immigration visa expiry date, we decided to go to Montreal for a couple of months and assess the job market. This strategy allowed us to temporarily experience what life in Canada might be like without us having to permanently give up our jobs and dispose of our house, car and other belongings in Bangladesh. Before leaving for Montreal, we got in touch with a Bangladeshi college professor, Dr. Ahmed, whose contact information we got

through a relative. Dr. Ahmed was known for his heart-warming, welcoming attitude towards newcomers, whom he would pick up from the airport, feed and accommodate in his own home, and assist with finding a place to live. He did the same for us.

We rented an apartment in Montreal and stayed there for about two months. This short stay provided a very good glimpse of the sort of lifestyle transformation that would take place once we settled in Canada. Housecleaning, grocery shopping, child-minding, cooking and earning money all had to be done singlehandedly. Life seemed so hectic and unsettled that when my two-year-old cried, so did I. I understood that starting life from scratch would be a monumental task, and that our first and most important job would be to overcome the accompanying sense of isolation and loneliness. Adjusting to the weather, figuring out the government office systems, applying for jobs and coping with a general lack of mobility were just a few of the innumerable issues that overwhelmed us and required courage to tackle properly.

Upon our return to Bangladesh after our short stay in Montreal, it took us a full year to get ourselves prepared to make the final move. The days and months before the actual move to Canada were excruciatingly difficult. Rabiul and I had countless discussions deliberating the pros and cons of such a move. Trying to come to decisions regarding concerns such as when to move and which province to move to, which cities would provide the best career and education opportunities and where we would find other Bangladeshis caused constant fear and anxiety.

In the end, the actual move felt like skydiving. Our landing plan was mapped out in detail. We equipped ourselves with the right gear, harnessed ourselves in securely and made a headlong dive, hoping to make a safe landing. We set foot on Canadian soil on September 21, 1989. The date is deeply etched in my memory. The emotional roller-coaster of thrill and fear as we took our first few steps into unknown territory engulfed both Rabiul and me, resulting in many sleepless nights. It was hard to extricate ourselves from a familiar and settled life with good, steady jobs and loving family and friends. However, the invaluable immigration visa, a once-in-a-life time opportunity to settle in Canada, could not be taken lightly. Thus, the skydive, our leap of faith.

3. THE EVENTUAL MOVE TO CANADA

The preparation for the final move was quite intense. To ascertain Rabiul's job opportunities, we had to research shipbuilding areas in Canada. The distinct areas were Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Vancouver. We chose the last because of its favourable weather conditions. We also researched universities in case the necessity of upgrading our degrees arose. While going through the University of British Columbia's handbook, we came across the name of Dr. Salahuddin, a Bangladeshi PhD scholar, and contacted him right away. Dr. Salahuddin picked us up from the airport and dropped us at the City Centre Motor Inn on Main Street, where we stayed for a few days before moving into a basement rental suite on Gladstone Street in East Vancouver. Connecting with Dr. Salahuddin was like a godsend, and we will be forever indebted to him for all his help during the time when we knew not a single soul in Vancouver.

Our experience in finding a place to live was very difficult and unwelcoming. Most landlords would perform the screening over the phone and then make us come and see the

place. As soon as we reached the location, we would be told that the place had been rented out. Each of the potential landlords we went to see raised different concerns, for instance that they would not rent to people with children or that we did not possess the references they required. It was obvious that our appearance did not match the unaccented and fluent English they had heard me speak over the phone. When we finally moved into the basement suite of a house, the woman upstairs would stomp on our ceiling or come to our door screaming that my girls were too noisy. It was a difficult start to our life in Vancouver.

4. OUR JOB SEARCH

Our priority after landing in Vancouver was to find jobs that were comparable on an economic and educational level to the positions we had left behind in Bangladesh. Realistically, we knew that this would not happen overnight, and had given ourselves about three years to settle down with suitable jobs. However, despite our qualifications and educational backgrounds, the planned time frame did not pan out the way we had hoped.

Within a month of our arrival, I had found myself a job by walking into an immigration consulting office. It was a brand-new office, and the owner, Mr. Parhar, seemed to be more focused on setting up the office than acquiring or tending to clients. My job was mainly to assist in cleaning and organizing the office. I was willing to settle into this job and make use of my knowledge and experience related to Canadian immigration. However, the job was very short-lived. Unfortunately, Mr. Parhar was not able to pay my salary on time and when he did, the cheques would bounce. I thus had to move on and look for other jobs. I spent hours poring through the classified section of the local newspaper. One of the jobs I applied for was that of an office manager with a non-profit social services organization. It happened to be in the same place where my two daughters went to preschool, which was walking distance from the place where we lived. The job application required a handwritten cover letter. I was quite excited by this requirement since I knew I had fairly good handwriting, having been drilled in cursive writing for years by the nuns at the convent school I had attended during my elementary years. I hoped that, if nothing else, my handwriting would catch the hiring personnel's attention and lead to a job interview. I'm not sure if it was because of my handwriting skills, but I did get a call for an interview and later a job offer.

I started working for Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House on March 15, 1990, about six months after moving to Canada. My initial plan was to stay in the job for two to three years and then move on to a public service job, an aspiration that my father and I had shared for me since I had completed my undergraduate degree in history. My father, who had been a government official in Bangladesh, had always wanted one of his children, especially a daughter, to follow his lead. After arriving in Canada, I kept this hope alive for quite some time and took all the necessary steps to apply for a federal job including sitting for required daylong exams, on which I managed to do very well. After passing these exams, in which hundreds of applicants had participated, the names were entered into a pool, which was revisited whenever there was a vacancy. However, one had to keep re-applying every six months to stay in the pool. I lost the opportunity to obtain a federal job since I was not able to keep my application updated. Thus my dream of working in a government office never materialized, although my desire to work for such organizations

as Citizenship and Canadian Immigration (CIC), the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and the Canada Customs and Border Agency remains alive to this day.

Rabiul, on the other hand, faced a very challenging situation with regards to finding a job in his own field. From the very onset of his job search, he realized that to get a foothold in the shipbuilding industry in Vancouver or elsewhere in Canada would be tough without upgrading his naval architecture degree from Bangladesh. Thus, he applied and was admitted to the University of British Columbia where he took a number of individual courses, hoping that upgrading his qualifications with some relevant courses would enable him to obtain a job in his field without doing a full four-year degree. He found it difficult to become a fulltime student and re-do his undergraduate degree while supporting his family. After a year of taking courses, he left the university and decided on a career change. He then took a 10-month course in electronics at Vancouver Community College and found himself a job at an electronic company. The closest he could get to working in shipbuilding was obtaining a job at a marine manufacturing company, where he has worked for over 10 years.

5. MY JOB EXPERIENCE

My job at Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House lasted over 27 years; I retired from it just recently, in 2017. It was a rewarding and fulfilling position. Through my work with the organization, I met amazing people whose selflessness and generosity inspired me immensely. It is through this job that the word volunteerism has taken on a very profound meaning for me. I learned that not all the work one does is motivated by the exchange of money. So much meaningful work can be done from the goodness of the soul, to benefit one's own life and the lives of those one is serving.

During the three decades I spent at my job, I experienced firsthand the various transformations related to office procedures and equipment, including the gradual digitalization of the whole office. Out went the typewriter and in came the word processor, resulting in the complete takeover of all office work by the computer. As these changes took place in the office, I had to upgrade my skills and take various instructional courses related to software to become more proficient in computer programs such as Pages, FileMaker, ACCPAC, etc. Writing by hand, which had been so important when I had first been hired, had gradually become obsolete. Within my own lifetime, I experienced the advent of computers and the decline of the typewriter and rolodex.

While my job experience in Canada has been positive, my husband's has been less so. For years, he remained relentless in his search for a job in the shipbuilding and engineering field. Doing odd jobs broke his heart and confidence. There were times when he regretted immigrating and wanted to go back to Bangladesh. While his current job does not give him much satisfaction, it provides him with a stable income to support his family. Unfortunately, his story is not different from those of hundreds of other immigrants in Canada whose education and qualifications are not utilized. Neither Rabiul nor I could understand or believe that the educational qualifications and experience of a naval architect – the very things that had made him eligible for an immigration visa in the first place – were not able to land him a job in Canada.

6. BALANCING LIFE

My major challenge in my work life was the commute to work. During the first couple of years when we lived in Vancouver, there was no commute at all. I lived very close to work and would come home during my lunch hour to feed my children and even do some cooking for dinner. However, all that changed when we bought a house in Surrey. This was in the early 90s, and the housing prices in Vancouver were beyond our reach. Even dilapidated, run-down houses were priced above our budget. It had always been part of our Canadian dream to own a home for our family, so with the surging housing prices in Vancouver we were forced to look for housing in Surrey. That's when commuting back and forth from work became quite a challenge. An hour-long or 45-minute drive each way took a toll on me. Public transportation was an option I made use of for many years, but catching buses or the skytrain did not save time or hassle.

Following our early years in Vancouver, our household expanded from four people to seven. After our marriage, Rabiul had to take charge of his two younger siblings, whom we sponsored and brought as immigrants to Canada. In the meantime, our immediate family got larger with the birth of our third daughter. With a household of seven people, a full-time job and an hour-and-a-half commute, every day was like walking a tight rope; I had to be constantly vigilant in order to keep my balance. The biggest challenge when the children were young was arranging childcare. Leaving my daughters in the care of a responsible adult where they would thrive and be happy was a difficult task. Rabiul changed his work hours from morning to evening shifts to tend to the children while I went to work. Our first priority when it came to my three daughters was to provide them with proper care and the best possible educational opportunities while we strove to build a life in Canada.

7. BEING BENGALI IN CANADA

Both Rabiul and I were quite aware of the fact that we had removed our children and ourselves far from our homeland with its cultural and religious norms and practices. Bearing that in mind, we always tried to keep our Bengali culture alive especially for our girls, whether it was through celebrations or festivals, food or attire. We also took them to visit Bangladesh so they could see and appreciate the ancestral roots of their parents and meet relatives they only saw in photos. Although my children liked eating Western food, their comfort food was Bengali cuisine, with their favourite dishes being *bhaat* (rice), *daal* (lentils), and *gosht* (meat). While we embraced Canada as our own homeland, rooting for the Canucks and celebrating Canada's success and achievements, the nostalgia and longing we felt for Bengali songs, poems, drama and movies was very much relevant in our everyday life. Our gradual adaptation to the Canadian way of life, such as taking vacations and enjoying leisure time as a family, had taken place quite unknowingly. When the children were young, our most enjoyable outdoor activity was to go camping with friends, which led us to visit picturesque locations rich with mountains, rivers, parks and forests. The meshing of our Canadian and Bangladeshi lifestyles took place so seamlessly that the two have become inseparable, though in many ways the scale has tipped more towards the Canadian side. This is quite noticeable during our visits to Bangladesh. Orderly conduct,

such as waiting patiently in long queues and refraining from blowing the car horn in traffic, has become so inherent in us that we sometimes feel like misfits in our own birthplace.

Having been born into a Bangladeshi family, we only spoke Bengali at home during my childhood. However, my father, being a liberal-minded person, saw things a little differently and believed in learning different languages for educational purposes. He sent all his children, including his daughters, to English medium schools where we learned Bengali as a second language. Having learned English from the elementary level onward, I had an edge when it came to pursuing higher education abroad and eventually immigrating to Canada; I never suffered from a language barrier. Nonetheless, Bengali language was front and centre in our lives, and Bengali songs, poetry and drama – especially the works of Rabindranath Tagore – occupy a very special place in my heart. After immigrating to Canada, our language at home remained Bengali, even with the children. However, my daughters naturally assumed a stronger affinity for the English language; their proficiency in Bengali lagged, in the sense that they could speak the language, albeit with an accent, but could not read or write in Bengali. They do express their desire to learn the language, and I hope that someday they get to fulfill that wish so that the Bengali language remains alive within the family.

As for French, the other official language of Canada, I do not know it very well except for a few words. Rabiul did take a French conversational course at the French Alliance Centre in Bangladesh before immigrating to Canada, though this was not sufficient to grant him any fluency in the language. My daughters are much more proficient in the French language, having taken it in school as a requirement for high school graduation. Two of my daughters also went to Quebec on a French exchange program to increase their fluency in the language. During one of these exchange programs, my daughter had to stay with a francophone family while their French-speaking daughter came and stayed with us to brush up on her English skills. Within a short time, the French girl spoke clear English and fell in love with Bengali food. She even came to my daughter's wedding, wore a saree and participated in a full-on Bengali wedding. The exchange of culture that took place has had a positive, lasting impact on all of us, making us realize that language barriers cannot impede human connection and shared experience.

8. THE ROLE OF RELIGION

In our religious celebrations too, there is an amalgamation of Canadian and Bangladeshi practices. During the Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays, we hardly miss a chance of getting families and friends together to cook a turkey and enjoy a sumptuous meal of stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and all the rest. Exchanging cards and gifts has become a part of our annual traditions. Going to Christmas parties at my own work and my husband's was an event I looked forward to every year. However, our own religious beliefs as Muslims also play an important role in our lives in Canada. This is largely because we feel the necessity to hold on to these beliefs for fear of losing that connection. However, I strongly believe that religion is a very private matter and should not interfere with my outside world. As parents, we felt the importance of introducing our children to our Muslim faith and providing them the opportunity of studying the Quran, teaching them *namaz* (prayers) and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Leading our lives as Muslims in the

city in which we live has proven to be easy because of the availability of *halal* food and the proximity of mosques for *jumaah* (Friday) prayers or other occasions. We celebrated *iftar* parties during the month-long fasting during Ramadan and enjoyed *Eid* celebrations in our Muslim community. In fact, we celebrate *Eid* just the same way we did in Bangladesh, if not with more pomp and circumstance. On *Eid* day, we all get up early in the morning, dress up in new clothes specially bought for the occasion, and go to the nearby prayer hall for the *Eid* prayers. It is only since coming to Canada that my daughters and I have attended the *Eid* prayers in a public space as this is not the norm for the women in Bangladesh. Every *Eid* we have an open house, and family and friends drop by whenever they can throughout the day. We are joined by work colleagues, non-Muslim neighbours and friends from our community, who come to share lunch or dinner with us on *Eid* days. Indeed, *Eid* for us has truly become a gathering of people, regardless of culture and religion, enjoying traditional Bangladeshi food.

9. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

When we arrived in Vancouver in the late 80s, there were very few Bengalis from Bangladesh in the Lower Mainland, probably about 100 families. It was a close-knit, strong community of people who would find the slightest excuse to get together for a party, be it for a birthday, an anniversary or a long weekend just to chat and catch up. Around this time, the Canada Bangladesh Cultural Association was formed; its founding member was Dr. Salauddin Ahmed, who also wrote the constitution of the Association. This is the very same Dr. Ahmed who had been of such immense help to us when we landed in Canada. My entry into the realm of community involvement began around this time. I joined the Canada Bangladesh Cultural Association as the Cultural Secretary. I remained involved with the Association for quite a few years in various capacities, including serving as the Treasurer, Secretary and Vice-President. In these roles, I helped organize numerous functions and public events like the Bangladeshi Independence Day celebrations, Language Day talks, annual picnics and various other social activities. My recollection of these days still evokes a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Although at times all the hard work behind the scenes remained unnoticed, it did provide me with a great opportunity to learn and practice skills related to leadership, public speaking and management experience. I was also among the very few women who had served in a leadership capacity with the Association at that time. Besides the Cultural Association, I have had the opportunity to participate in various other organizations, namely the Probeen Wellness Society, a seniors' wellness group and the Canada Bangladesh Community Centre project. Taken together, these volunteer experiences have not only helped strengthen my connections to my Bangladeshi heritage but have also provided a sense of belonging and community within my Canadian surroundings.

10. IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

The privilege of upholding one's own culture in a foreign land is a great blessing. Canada's commitment and policy to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians

has made our lives as immigrants from far-away lands a lot easier and more enjoyable. The opportunity to form social and cultural groups that help promote one's own culture also creates a support group that assists with the settlement process in a new country. For almost all immigrants, the nostalgia for indigenous things such as food, language, clothing, customs and rituals is never too far from their minds. Most community groups provide a platform for the expression and enjoyment of all that is left behind halfway across the world. For many of us, practicing and retaining our culture and customs for the sake of our children is very important, so that the next generation can observe, emulate and carry forward this heritage. Canada's multicultural policy helps maintain this rich diversity of race, ethnic origin and religion, and has given new immigrants like us a sense of belonging. I believe that, in doing so, Canada has made great strides in breaking down biases and discrimination and fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst all its citizens.

11. LOVE FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

I have been in love with First Nations arts and crafts since I first set foot in Canada and saw them on display at the airport. With their blend of nature and human expression, First Nations paintings and carvings are not only beautiful but symbolic in their ability to tell a story. My first association with the First Nations people came during my work at Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House. There I became close friends with many individuals of First Nations heritage and listened to their heart-wrenching stories of abuse, isolation and resiliency in trying to rise above all their hardship. An interesting community event of the First Nations people is the Pow Wow, a social gathering of Aboriginal people which usually includes competitive dancing. A Pow Wow used to be held annually at Trout Lake Community Centre, in partnership with Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House. For me, the main attractions of the Pow Wow were the arts and crafts tables, the dancers and the beautiful regalia – special clothing made of buttons and feathers that the elders and the dancers wore. Occasions celebrating the rich cultural heritage of First Nations people, such as the Pow Wow, serve as a continual reminder that the recognition of other ethnic groups, particularly those that first inhabited this land, is an important aspect of understanding Canadian history and our shared identity.

12. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE PURSUIT OF OUR DREAMS

Dreaming is a continuous process, and while some dreams get fulfilled, a lot more crowd the space. In retrospect, while we may have realized some of our dreams in Canada, many more need to be accomplished, so the pursuit is still on. However, every little bit of progress that takes place, like my oldest daughter becoming an engineer, my second daughter completing her PhD and my youngest wanting to go to law school, make both my husband and I feel that the main purpose of immigration may have been fulfilled. What we couldn't achieve ourselves in Canada has been achieved by our daughters. Rabiul always says that his daughter holding an engineering job in Canada has fulfilled his own desire, and given him reassurance regarding our decision to immigrate to Canada.

