

**ROUND TABLE II: MULTICULTURALISM, ACTIVISM,
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

It is common knowledge among the Bengali community of the Lower Mainland that Bengali settlement in British Columbia started in the 1960s. From the 1960s to the turn of the century, the Bengali community did not grow much, and as a result it was a tight-knit community. At the turn of the century, the number of Bengali immigrants started to grow. Currently, the Lower Mainland boasts two registered Bengali cultural societies, the combined membership of which totals approximately 175 households. Moreover, there are Bengalis in the Lower Mainland who do not belong to either of these two organizations, and others scattered throughout British Columbia.

1. PARTICIPANTS

Against this backdrop, a group of 10 Bengalis were invited to a round table discussion on the second day of a two-day conference centred on the migration of Bengalis to British Columbia. All participants in this group are Bengalis from India. Demographic details of this group are as follows:

Total Number of Participants: 10
<i>Female: 5 Male: 5</i>
Age Range: 32 – 57
<i>Female: 32 – 42</i>
<i>Male: 39 – 57</i>
Year of Arrival in Canada: 2007 – 2018
Language Skill: <i>Bengali, Hindi and English: 10</i>
<i>Marathi: 2 German: 1 Urdu: 1</i>
Religion: <i>Hindu: 6 Agnostic: 3</i>

All but two of these participants can be defined as part of a nuclear family. Chart 1 illustrates the number of dependent children per household, and chart 2 shows their level of education indicating that the participants had a minimum of Bachelor's degree.

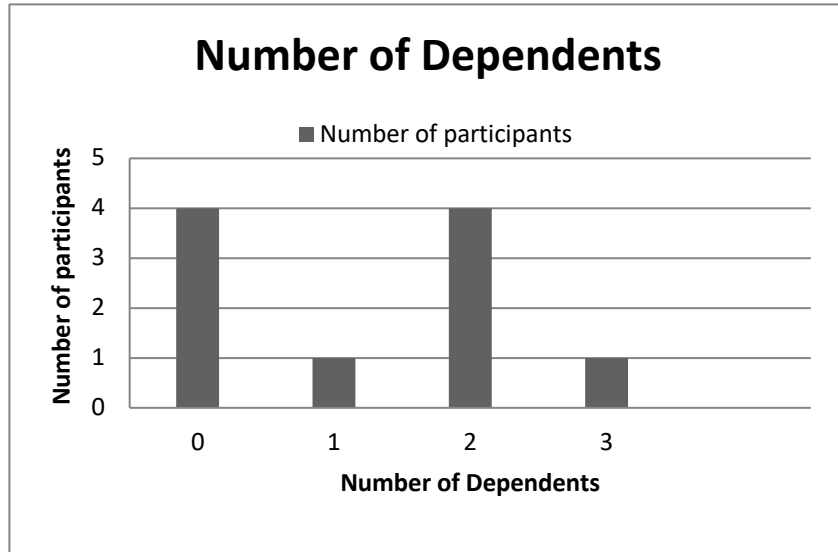


Chart 1: Number of dependents in the families of the participants

The 10 participants were a group of highly educated professionals. Seven out of ten participants had received their education in India. In this Indian-educated group, two had taken some executive development courses abroad. Except for one, all were employed in their respective fields of training.

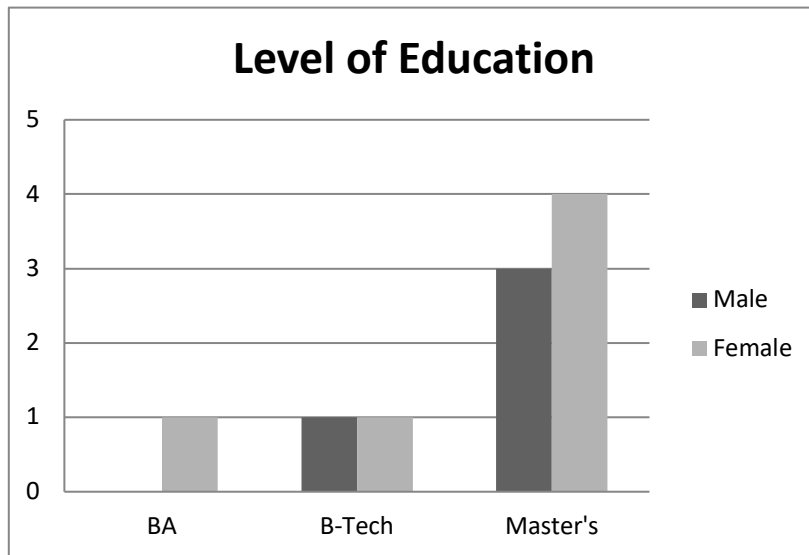


Chart 2: Level of Education among the participants

Though the title of the round table forum specifically states multiculturalism, activism, and social justice as the subjects under discussion, the participants were not limited in their topics. Rather, they engaged in an overarching discussion about their personal stories of migration and their experiences in Canada.

2. SUMMARY OF THE FORUM

Discussion began with the reason for participants' migration to Canada, which mainly presented as several individual reasons indirectly tied to Canada's multiculturalism policy. None of the participants were under any compulsion to leave India. Six participants out of ten had lived outside of India prior to moving to Canada. Their decision to move out of India and eventually settle in British Columbia was an effect of globalization. The rationale for choosing Canada varied from one person to another. One participant chose to immigrate to Canada from Germany because, as an only son/child, he was responsible for taking care of his parents who lived in India but would eventually live with their only child as tradition prescribes. Canada's immigration laws accommodated this need, thus he chose to move to Canada. Being in the IT sector and having worked in a Western country, his transition to Canada was smooth. Another participant who was also living in a European country prior to immigrating to Canada said that he did his research and found out that his credentials would be accepted on a par with the Canadian standards in his field, and only then did he decide to migrate. The most noteworthy reason for choosing to migrate to Canada was expressed by a member who came as a spouse; their decision to immigrate here was Canada's same sex marriage policy. This participant's story has the underpinnings of social activism, as Indian society in general is still very closed-minded when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. By leaving that country and mindset and choosing Canada as their destination, this couple crossed many boundaries, allowing for new freedoms. The fact that this person sat with other fellow Bengalis and openly stated the reason for their migration is also noteworthy.

As mentioned earlier, modern Bengali migration to BC began in the 1960s. In the late 1970s, the first registered Bengali cultural society, the Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society, was established. It remains an active and growing society to date. There is a second Bengali cultural society that formed around 2005, known as Utsab. Both these societies have a very similar calendar of events, and these events not only provide Bengali members with the opportunity to celebrate some of their ethnic festivities, but also function as networking hubs for Bengalis to connect with each other.

It is a mark of a quintessentially multicultural society for there to be a number of cultural societies within an immigrant community. Most often, these societies are formed by the first group of immigrants from that ethnic community, and reflect the needs and culture of that time. However, culture is never static, and the problem with this type of ethnic cultural societies is that often they tend to be frozen in time – a snapshot of the time of the founders who formed these societies. Meanwhile, the culture in their home country continues to evolve.

Most of the participants in this round table discussion are younger than the first registered Bengali cultural society of BC. Through the discussion, it became evident that their generation has different expectations and ideas related to belonging to a cultural society. One participant expressed that though she was very happy to find out about the society when she first came to Vancouver, she felt daunted by what she perceived as the society's puritanical approach to preserving the Bengali language when she attended her first event. Whether this society does or does not hold this view is not the issue here, but the fact that she perceived this is significant and has two prongs to it. The first is that, being a Bengali, this participant felt intimidated among Bengalis whom she perceived as puritans.

This demonstrates the cultural shift among Bengalis in India. Secondly, the fact that she brought this issue to everyone's attention is an example of social activism, albeit within her own ethnic group.

Other participants expressed the need for a better networking system to support newcomers to the city/country. These participants are looking at the cultural society as a system which should serve beyond its current mission, which is to provide a platform to showcase arts and celebrate festivals. They want these associations to provide systematic support to newcomers. For example, they saw the need to have a community inventory of whom to connect with for what reason – such as talking to parents who have raised children here when they need to understand the dynamics of raising children in a foreign land. Once again, this reflects how culture is evolving. When the cultural society was formed by the first wave of Bengali immigrants, their needs were different. Forming a cultural society to maintain their cultural heritage was first and foremost among their goals. The small number of members knew each other, and each was aware of what the other families were going through. Since they were the first wave of Bengalis, they did not have the option to look up to someone else for advice. They were the trailblazers. On the other hand, recent arrivals are coming to this city where an established and functional Bengali cultural society already exists. To them, the society is the representative of the Bengali community within the Lower Mainland. They know what it is currently, but they are asking what more it can do. This was evident during the discussion about the plight of Canada's Aboriginal people, and the truth and reconciliation process. Each participant was forthcoming in saying that they are learning about the country's history slowly. Some mentioned that they are learning from their children's history textbooks. They showed a good understanding of the plight of the Indigenous peoples of Canada, and suggested that the government should make the effort to have all newcomers know the history of the country's First Nations. One participant suggested the Bengali cultural societies could play a role in bringing the Bengali community and the Aboriginal community closer by inviting members of local First Nations communities to our cultural events. This seemingly ordinary suggestion incorporates multiculturalism, social justice, and activism.

Bengalis from India are historically known to be proponents of social justice. Though the round table discussion did not overtly address the issue of social justice in Canada, this issue surfaced incognito several times during discussion of different topics. The oldest member in this group was 57 years old, and had migrated when he was in his early fifties. Prior to coming to Canada, he lived outside of India for many years and worked for a multi-national company where he held a senior position. Upon his arrival in Canada, he faced tremendous difficulty in finding a job. He applied for 300 jobs, but prospective employers made it clear that they wanted a person with Canadian experience. Eventually he did find employment, but at a much lower level. The fact that he had 20 years' experience working for a foreign oil company did not seem to matter to the Canadian employers. The frustration felt by this participant is not that unusual among the recent immigrants in Canada. The ever perplexing question remains: if the newcomer is not given a job, then how will they gain Canadian experience? Listening to this participant's plight, the other participants expressed that though they are employed in the field of their training, they would have been at a higher position had they lived in India.

A female participant shared her experience at her workplace in Canada. She worked on a team where all the other members belonged to a particular ethnic group and most of

them were men. She too had worked in different countries outside of India. However, she sensed resistance from the members of her team here. She felt that just because she was female and from India, the team members had difficulty accepting her authority over them. She had never faced this situation anywhere before. This could point to an alarming issue, as Canada is a country of immigrants and it is necessary that the different ethnic groups that create the mosaic of the society respect and understand each other regardless of race, gender, or culture.

3. CONCLUSION

Attracted by the rhetoric of multiculturalism in Canada, young Bengali immigrants from India are aspiring to carve out a distinct identity for themselves, both professionally and culturally. Participants did not face overt racism during their settlement process, but became aware of undercurrents based on preconceived biases at their workplaces. Though they cannot be labeled as activists, they demonstrated an innate sense of social justice when some of them described the obstacles they faced during the job search or at their workplaces. While maintaining their cultural identity by actively getting involved with the local Bengali cultural societies, this group of people did not by any means limit their involvement in Canadian society at large. Four of them owned and operated their own successful businesses. All of them were becoming aware of Canada's Aboriginal peoples' history, and the truth and reconciliation process. The fact that one member among the ten suggested that the local Bengali cultural societies should invite members of local First Nations communities to their functions captures the essence of multiculturalism that Canada stands for.

