

**INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS  
CANADIAN SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH: GENDER, IDENTITY,  
SEXUALITY, AND ACTIVISM**

A large majority of South Asian adults choose to immigrate to Canada to create opportunities for a better future for subsequent generations. While first-generation adult immigrants struggle to integrate and participate in the Canadian labor market, education, healthcare, and other systems, and the community at large, the second generation or youth are expected to have an easier time with such processes. A growing number of anecdotes, literature, studies, and statistics, however, show that second-generation immigrants and youth from South Asian families and ancestral backgrounds find themselves in a different battle to define who they are and where they belong, and to secure a better place on the socioeconomic ladder compared to their first-generation parents. They are generally torn between the differing and somewhat contradictory cultural, social, and political expectations and norms of their families vs. those of mainstream Canadian society, where they often feel marginalized and racialized as the immigrant “other.”

In September 2017, we organized a two-day conference titled *Canada 150 Migration of Bengalis* at SFU Harbour Centre and the UBC Institute of Asian Research/Centre for India and South Asia Research. The conference was the first ever documentation of the migration of Bengalis to Canada. SFU library electronically published the proceedings, and the journal *Alternate Routes* also published selected articles as a special volume under our editorship.

At the Migration of Bengalis conference, there were four youth presenters in the session titled *Canadian Bengali Youth: Identity, Social, Cultural, and Family Life*. They eloquently pointed out that immigrant adults might be overwhelmed in a new country, i.e., Canada; however, the constraints and struggles of their children are frequently undermined and overlooked. Youths encounter both overt and covert challenges at home and beyond and often struggle to fit into Canadian society. The session was very vibrant and much discussed, as it triggered a number of contemporary youth issues including identity, conflicts in family, sexuality, language, multiculturalism, parents’ emphasis on high academic achievement, and “ethnic”/community gossip that often sets limits or cultural boundaries in social interaction. We humbly confess that the conference titled *Canadian South Asian Youth* is the outcome of this stimulating youth session at the Migration of Bengalis conference.

The experience of growing up for Canadian South Asian Youth, similar to youth in many other immigrant communities in Canada, is a continuous struggle between the family and the world beyond. In this context, such mixed experiences of life, personal identities, sexuality, intergenerational conflicts over family values, honor versus shame, and workplace encounters require many social and cultural adjustments. The conference was thus expected to explore issues of identity formation/negotiation, the role of genders/family, sexuality, intergenerational dilemmas and conflict, experiences in the workplace as well as in the job market, the interface

between immigrants and the wider community, and the role of social and community activism related to participation as Canadians.

This one-day conference, titled *Canadian South Asian Youth: Gender, Identity, Sexuality, and Activism*, was held at Simon Fraser University (SFU) Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver on April 6th, 2019. The program started with a brief welcoming speech by the organizers along with due acknowledgements that the conference was taking place on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. This was followed by Harsha Walia's mesmerizing keynote speech. In her speech, Harsha Walia, a well-known activist of South Asian origin, problematized the category of South Asian and urged the audience to explore beyond simplistic geographical identities to not only examine South Asians' subjugation but also recognize violence against South Asian women and racialized minorities. She critically analyzed how white supremacists are the real domestic threat in Canada despite media efforts to racialize terrorism, specifically by giving it a Muslim face. Harsha further noted the silence around homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and sexual violence as these are portrayed as taboo subjects in the South Asian community. Harsha cautioned the audience that her commitment to end myriad forms of violence has never been based on the principle of protecting only South Asian people. The keynote speech generated many questions and comments that were eloquently addressed by Harsha. The conversation continued outside the room in the lobby area as Session I started in due course. The keynote speech thus effectively set the tone of the Canadian South Asian Youth Conference.

Sanzida Habib transcribed Harsha's keynote speech, as Harsha had faced constraints in writing a paper due to her activism/family obligations on top of her regular paid job. Considering the significance of Harsha's thought-provoking speech, we negotiated with Harsha and agreed to transcribe and publish her speech, as it was videoed by Mazhar Haque, a committed volunteer for the conference. The accuracy of the transcribed paper was further verified by Harsha. The entire process sounds complicated, but everything worked out smoothly. As editors, we consider it appropriate to include the keynote speech in the style and format delivered at the conference.

The conference consisted of five sessions, including a panel organized by Rebecca Scott Yoshizawa. Session I, *Identity, Cultural Hybridity, and Belonging*, was chaired by Charles Greenberg of Capilano University. This session consisted of four presentations, with three submitting their papers for these proceedings. Aneesha Grewal, a second-generation South Asian settler, argued for a deconstruction of colonialism and imperialism to comprehend the identity of South Asians. The paper highlighted media representation of the South Asian community as problematic, as the media seem to consider that this culture needs intervention. According to Aneesha, South Asian men are generally portrayed as violent and aggressive while South Asian women are portrayed as victims. Such a portrayal of a violent, racialized society offers a justification for white settler-colonialism. In conclusion, Aneesha pointed out that gender equality is still far away for South Asian women. Akhil Dattani explained how his hybrid identity (Gujarati and Canadian) was formed by school experiences as well as music and religion. Akhil pointed out that his ethnicity and religion had become targets of bullying in school, and consequently, he immersed himself into the world of music to search for a sense of belonging. As a child, such experiences of alienation taught him that he was different from the rest of the white Canadian kids. Further, he faced expectations from his parents to perform well

academically. Akhil's paper demonstrated a candid acceptance of his ignorance of the complexities of Indian classical music as a child and how he was influenced by a narrative of not questioning the "guru," i.e., teacher. He discussed how he soon discovered the politics inside the music industry, as he frequently experienced under-appreciation and subjugation. When he went to university, Akhil finally found a place to belong and amassed a group of friends. Consequently, university became a place for his hybrid identity to flourish. According to Akhil, he might still be unpacking his identity, but he does not have to be torn between those two worlds anymore. Maisha Haque, born in Bangladesh but raised in Vancouver, identified herself as a Bengali Canadian and illustrated her bi-cultural lives. She eloquently pointed out factors that have shaped her identity. Maisha emphasized her Bengaliness (saying she was more Bengali than her younger brothers) and argued that culture should not be disregarded as only historical because culture is socially constructed. She also recognized that skin color consciously or unconsciously shapes identities. According to Maisha, to be a South Asian should mean more than just being brown.

Session II, *Gendered Violence, Representation, and Resistance*, chaired by Sarika Bose of the University of British Columbia, consisted of three presentations, of which two are included in the proceedings. Harpreet Kaur Mandel argued that the violence prevalent in the Punjabi Sikh community is the result of a second-generation immigration experience and intersectional oppression. According to Harpreet, there exists a lack of attention to how a culture of toxic and hyper-masculinity has pushed the young men of this community into violence. The notions of patriarchal masculinity and white masculinity with which they are constantly bombarded have given rise to violence as these young men try to navigate their cultural and Canadian identities. Harpreet demonstrated the barriers that immigrant parents of second-generation Canadians experience. She further discussed the ethno-cultural differences that these young men experience in forming their identities, including the split between private and public spheres, interlocking oppressions, multiculturalism, and the cross-cultural barriers they face as second-generation Canadians. As Harpreet rightfully points out, this should be considered a Canadian as opposed to a South Asian issue. Veronica Sudesh unpacked the tragic incidents of second-generation South Asian Canadian youth who have lost their lives due to brutal violence directed against them. Within this category of second-generation South Asian Canadians, youth are more at risk of abuse, exploitation, and violence. Veronica's paper examined three case studies: (a) inter-racial and group-perpetrated violence as seen in the murder of Reena Virk, who was bullied and killed by white teenage youths; (b) intra-community and individual-perpetrated violence as seen in the case of Maple Batalia, who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend; and (c) intra-community and family-perpetrated honor killing as seen in the killing of Aqsa Parvez, who was murdered by her father and brother for not conforming to religious and familial values. The paper also highlights activism on part of those individual families who experienced the loss of their children. According to Veronica, the South Asian Canadian community along with different organizations has made a number of attempts to turn their grief into an awareness-building campaign surrounding issues such as bullying, dating abuse, and all forms of violence against women. Veronica duly pointed out the gaps in existing literature on the issue of violence against second-generation Canadian South Asian youth. There indeed exists a dearth of information pertinent to those who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ youth.

Session III, *Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Community Resistance*, chaired by Habiba Zaman of Simon Fraser University, consisted of four presentations, with two complete papers ultimately being submitted to these Proceedings. Based on the historical records of polysexuality in South Asian literature, Bidushy Rahman's paper examined sexuality versus desire. According to Bidushy, historically the British were punishing sodomy in the United Kingdom at a time when India was far from such a practice. Bidushy investigated 15th century literature pertinent to the Mughal Empire and demonstrated the intersections of South Asian homosexual relations with age, class, religion, caste, and other dimensions which make it more complicated. Bidushy further pointed out the difference between Hinduism and Islam in dealing with homosexual relationships. Articulating sexuality as separate from desire, Bidushy argued that South Asians did not have a fixed sexual identity until Britain colonized India. Desire is fluid; therefore, Bidushy contends that one cannot categorize it into a heteronormative binary. To counter queerphobia in multiple South Asian communities in Canada, Bidushy argued, there is a need to question the archive, which was preserved by those in power, i.e., colonizers. Consequently, a de-colonizing discourse is required in order to examine sexuality. Moving from an individual to a broader intergenerational lifecycle, Leena Hasan's paper illustrates the evolution of her identity and the reasons she was drawn to activism. She reflected on how her negotiations between the Islamic values taught and lived by her mother as a role model and the dominant Western society she grew up in since her birth shaped her activism. Leena, according to her own accounts, first started activism in medical school, where she led an NGO called "Books with Wings." As a socially and politically conscious person, she identified the intergenerational nature of her privilege, the impacts of colonization on her family, and the significance of positive self-identity. Despite her self-exploration and activism surrounding various issues including the environment and climate change, she still identifies her mother as a significant role model.

Neena Randhawa, a community activist and manager at Chimo Community Services based in Richmond, chaired Session IV: *Poverty, Social Justice and Inclusion*. This comprised four presentations, of which only two were submitted as complete papers. In his paper, Ishmam Bhuiyan convincingly argued that the two concepts that have long been adopted in addressing social-economic inequality and defending the most vulnerable —namely, charity and equality— should be completely rejected. An overreliance on charity normalizes the existence of injustice, and those social movements relying on an equality model assume our communities are equal. This sort of assumption ignores the need for "equity-based activism." As an immigrant settler on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples who inspired his activism, Ishmam considers integrating a de-colonizing and class-based lens into every social movement. Using an analysis of homelessness in Vancouver and his own activism in high school, Ishmam calls for a collective understanding whereby the most privileged take a step back and make space for social transformation. Avanti Haque, based on self-reflection, narrated the emergence of her consciousness regarding race and identity in a small town school in Manitoba. Avanti described how she lacked a sense of belonging in the classroom because the vast majority of the people around her were white. Avanti believes that a decolonizing curriculum is essential to think over critical matters including race. Further, she emphasized having discussions about race relations at dinner tables in homes to create unity and solidarity

with the larger Canadian society. Avanti's paper puts us in other people's shoes and reminds the reader to view such matters from other people's perspectives.

Session V, *Autoethnographic Reflections of Feminist South Asian Youth*, was organized and chaired by Rebecca Yoshizawa. Only one out of two presenters submitted a final paper to these Proceedings. Amrit Dhillon eloquently pointed out her internalized racism, sexism, and misogyny while narrating her own family life and her experience of the outside world. One of the best examples she offered of internalized racism was a practice of saying her own name in an accent that made it easier for Canadians to pronounce. Amrit witnessed many instances of gendered racism and sexism, and consequently she also internalized sexism and misogyny. As a young child, she vividly remembered her father's abusive behavior and alcoholism, and her mother leaving an abusive relationship; Amrit subsequently started working at a convenience store at a very young age to help support the family. She is equally aware of the subjugation and colonization of Indigenous women as well as the gender stereotypes in the South Asian community. According to Amrit, racialized women's daily challenges and struggles differ from those of white women. She suggested using intersectionality as an analytical tool to investigate South Asian women's subjugation.

To summarize, the papers in these Conference Proceedings include critical personal reflections, sharp discursive analyses, and empirical examinations of complex structural, social, political, and cultural issues that shape identity and involvement in activism around community as well as nation-building for a number of South Asian Canadian youth. The conference provided a glimpse of the experiences and thoughts of Canadian youth whose ancestry may be linked to South Asia and diasporic communities in many other parts of the world. The objective was neither to represent geography nor to represent any particular country, but to identify themes and topics that are burning issues for these youths in Canada. Both of us recognize the downside of identity politics; however, the conference demonstrated how the issue of identity is embedded in the fabric of Canadian society and the discourse of Canadian nation-building. Through the lens of identity, the conference successfully explored sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, and the intersections among such oppressive systems of power and discrimination. Both of us want to express our sincere gratitude and felicitations to these largely first-time presenters, speakers, session-chairs, volunteers, and most of all, engaged participants. We also hope the Proceedings resulting from this conference will moderately contribute to the literature on this highly relevant topic and ignite further dialogue and research on the important issues raised by a few courageous second-generation Canadian youth.