

## Editorial Introduction

### Migration of Bengalis to Canada: History, Settlement, Identity, and Social Justice

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The nine articles in this special issue of *Alternate Routes* were presented at the *Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis*, held at the Harbour Centre, Simon Fraser University and the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada on September 16 – 17, 2017. The conference was triggered by our academic desire to examine comprehensively the history of migration of Bengalis or *Bangla*-speaking people to Canada. The term “Bengali” is an anglicized version of *Bangla* used during the approximately two hundred year British colonial rule of India, and is widely used in documents even today. In short, those who speak *Bangla* as their mother tongue are known as Bengalis.

As long-time researchers working with Asian immigrants in Canada, and through our involvement in the Metropolis Research Project, we realized that there was hardly any academic publication on/about Bengali-Canadians. As a result, the conference was timely on the eve of Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary to document the history, settlement patterns, and contemporary trends of Bengali immigrants in Canada.

#### Why Study Migration of Bengalis?

Migrations are an integral part of human history, as people in ancient times chose to migrate either for survival or for environmental reasons. While natural forces and the need for survival have kept humans on the move for millennia, major global factors such as colonization and industrialization have profoundly influenced migration across the world. With the growth and advancement of capitalism, labour migration has also become an integral part of human history. With the aggressive expansion of capitalism in a new millennium

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and the growth of nation states since World War II, migration has also become unprecedentedly controlled and restricted. While capital, goods, machineries, and technologies are highly mobile and transcend national borders, peoples' mobility from the South to the North has been restricted and intensively regulated in this era of neo-liberal globalism. Despite the regulated nature of migration, with borders controlled by armed personnel and the construction of walls along borders in many states – for instance, the US-Mexico border – the number of international migrants has increased from approximately 150 million in 2000 to 210 million people in 2010 (ILO, 2010, cited in Beneria, Deere and Kabeer, 2012). It is estimated that approximately 50% of all migrants are women, but this may vary from country to country.

Migration of the streams of Bengalis to Canada happens principally from two geographical sources: Bangladesh and West Bengal, India (recently renamed “Bangla” in Bengali, and “Bengali” in English). As will become evident from the articles in this volume, Bengalis have been gradually settling in Canada since at least the 1960s. However, no statistics on Bengali migration to Canada are available, because Statistic Canada counts Bengalis under the South Asian category, which includes many ethnic and linguistic groups and nationalities.

It is important to point out that Bengalis are the seventh largest linguistic group in the world, consisting mainly of *Bangla*-speaking people from Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. In Canada, for various reasons, the Census as well as researchers generally lump this linguistic and cultural group under one umbrella category: South Asians. Consequently, the presence and contributions of Bengalis in Canada are neither visible nor easily recognized. It is thus absolutely essential to document the history of migration of Bengalis, illuminating settlement patterns, identity in a settler colonial society, and Bengali Canadians' contributions to wider Canadian society.

### **Profile of Canadian Bengalis**

Early migration of Bengalis to Canada in the 1900s was largely from West Bengal, India. Both India and Pakistan were British colonies under the banner of India until 1947. Migration of Bengalis from Bangladesh began following the devastating war in what was then East Pakistan, and the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Anecdotal stories suggest that very few Bengalis from then East Pakistan migrated to Canada prior to 1971 due to the discriminatory immigration practices of both Pakistan and Canada. For the past 30 to 40 years, many Bengalis, particularly from Bangladesh, have made their

homes in Canada, in major cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. Of late, Vancouver, British Columbia has become a major destination for Bengali immigrants, as it is a major entry point from Asia.

In terms of the nature of employment, Bengalis from West Bengal (India) are generally doctors, engineers, professors, IT experts, teachers, and so on. Many of them have been living in Greater Vancouver for over 40 years. In sum, they are skilled/economic immigrants according to Canada Immigration and Citizenship (CIC). On the other hand, Bengalis from Bangladesh belong to diverse groups including engineers, doctors, professors, taxi drivers, chefs, healthcare workers, owners of small/ethnic shops/businesses, frontline service providers, restaurant workers, security guards, and so on.

Despite differences in nationalities and origins, Bengali as a language binds these two major immigrant groups together. They collaborate in celebrating events like the Tagore festival, which includes the celebration of renowned Bengali literary figures such as Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, commonly known as a rebel poet.

### **Canada's Immigration Acts and Migration of Bengalis**

The increasing migration of Bengalis to Canada happened largely due to the removal of racist Canadian immigration policies. Canada's economic development and growth are inextricably linked not only with the history of colonization and the subjugation of the North American Indigenous population, but also with immigrant labour. Once the colonization of the First Nations people began with the arrival of the first Europeans in Canada, immigration policies gradually developed as a significant tool for building Canada as a nation state.

Since Confederation in 1867, Canada has adopted several immigration laws and policies. A number of scholars (Arat-Koc, 1999/2000; Calliste, 1996; Jakubowski, 1997) have poignantly argued that Canada's immigration policies have been discriminatory in nature and thus perpetuate gender inequality, racism, and class-based social division. Examples of significant discriminatory Acts are: (i) the legislation commonly known as the Head Tax on Chinese immigrants (1885 – 1947), which effectively terminated the entry of Chinese immigrants except merchants and students; (ii) the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement that made the Japanese government set a maximum quota of 400 Japanese people allowed to immigrate to Canada per year; this Act was signed in 1908, and the quota was further reduced to 150, a clear indication of the increased curtailment of Japanese

immigration to Canada; and (iii) the Immigration Act of 1908, generally known as the Continuous Journey Act, which prohibited the entry of people from the Indian subcontinent and resulted in a steep decline in the number of South Asian people in Canada. In essence, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentlemen's Agreement, and the Continuous Journey Act were all effective mechanisms for controlling immigrants from Asia. These acts effectively ensured "race purity," as almost no Asians immigrated to Canada until after World War II. Canada thus deterred migration of Asians, including Bengalis, until introducing a universal points system into immigration policy.

In the 1960s, Canada began a shift from blatantly discriminatory policies to non-discriminatory immigration policies. The Immigration Act of 1976 further removed racial discrimination, and thus established a universal points system regardless of racial or geographic origin. This points system prioritized education, training, and occupational skills for selection and admission of immigrants. Consequently, Bengalis, especially those educated, trained, and skilled in their country of origin, have been allowed to migrate to Canada since the 1980s. This also coincided with the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 as a nation state. However, documentation of the migration of Bengalis, including their settlement patterns, identity, and contributions to Canadian society, is almost non-existent in academic publications.

### **Selection of Articles: Process and Objectives**

This special issue of *Alternate Routes* to some extent fills the gap in the immigration literature in Canada. These nine articles were selected out of twenty-one articles that were digitized by Simon Fraser University Library under the title *Canada 150 Conference Proceedings Migration of Bengalis* (2018). The Proceedings also included several welcome addresses, an extensive review of the conference, a conference program, and a detailed summary of the two-day conference that took place on two major university campuses – SFU Harbour Centre campus and UBC Point Grey campus – in September 2017.

The conference papers broadly covered the history and settlement patterns (municipalities and neighbourhoods) of Bengali migrants and explored the socio-economic, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of Bengali migrants as well as their contributions to Canada and Canadian multiculturalism. The papers selected for this special issue cover four major themes – history, settlement, identity, and social justice – that the authors have examined and illustrated in numerous ways. The selection of nine out of twenty-one papers

presented at the conference was not an easy task for the editors. Those selected for this special issue of *Alternate Routes* are largely research-based, original, and innovative, and contribute new insights/knowledge/academic rigor as well as scholarship. All articles went through an anonymous review process, and the authors assiduously attended to and addressed the reviewers' comments.

### **Organization of the Issue**

As noted earlier, the articles included herein address four major themes – history, settlement, identity, and social justice – that intersect in various ways. Most significantly, these articles call attention to gaps in the immigration and settlement literature. The articles have been organized in such a way as to provide a narrative of the history and growth of migration patterns and the diversity of experience and stories associated with the journey to Canada.

In her article, Bidisha Ray provides a thought-provoking historical account of transnational migration. Ray recounts the earliest wave of migration from the British-ruled Indian province of Bengal. The Bengalis were considered to be the original inhabitants of the Bengal region in British India. Despite the fact that Bengalis have been historically classified as “Indian” or “East Pakistani” as their national identities, the rich and diverse Bengali culture has created other cultural and sub-cultural distinctions.

Tania Das Gupta addresses the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of migration to Canada, the reality of political, legal, social, and economic mechanisms, and how racialized immigrant communities – in particular, Canadian Bengalis – have become the targets in internal and external disputes about national identity. Through her research-based article, Das Gupta demonstrates how the Canadian Bengali community experiences xenophobia that is frequently downplayed and sometimes denied by the Canadian state and society. Racism and xenophobia are distinct phenomena, although they often overlap. While racism generally implies distinction based on difference in physical features, such as skin color, xenophobia is rooted in the perception that the Other is alien or originates from outside the mainstream community or Canadian nation. Das Gupta's article continues with an interactive and fascinating discussion on how Bengali community members see themselves as Canadians as well as how they mobilize collectively toward a common identity and share manifestations of common ancestry upon migration to Canada. At the conference, Das Gupta sparked a vibrant debate around the official and popular self-understandings of the Canadian Bengali community as a particular historical,

cultural, multi/mono-ethnic, and multi/mono-linguistic as well as multi/mono-national identity. These concepts stand in contradiction to the oppressive policies and practices that exclude or subordinate Bengali ethnic identities, culture, language, tradition, religious faith, and national origin.

Emdad Haque and Helal Mohiuddin focus on how Bengali migration and diaspora fit into the process of nation-building in Canada, particularly in Manitoba. Bengali immigrants remain one of the fastest growing diaspora communities in Manitoba. The authors note that Canada enjoys a diverse regional identity – including English-Canadian identity, French-Canadian identity, and Indigenous identity. Thus, immigrants' identity is also as diverse. The article continues by making an enthusiastic point about rethinking ethnic, regional, and national identity. Haque and Mohiuddin provide a set of questions they wanted to answer through their article: Who are Bengalis in Canada? How have these Bengalis changed over time? How do these Bengalis differ from others? What differences exist among the Bengalis in Canada?

Based on oral history and interviews with elders/seniors in the community, Supriya Bhattacharyya provides a review of the history of Bengali migration to British Columbia from West Bengal. According to Bhattacharyya's findings, professionals were the first to migrate to Canada in the 1960s. Some came to Canada for university education and later stayed and made Canada their home and created a vibrant cultural community in British Columbia. Culturally, Bengalis are indeed attached to their ancestral language, and are active in an array of celebrations and festivals that remind them of their cultural heritage.

Sanzida Habib's paper addresses the ways in which Bengali immigrant women's health is related to their lived experiences in Canada. With particular attention to breast and cervical cancer screening, Habib suggests that in addition to factors such as age, length of stay in Canada, professional skills, and education status, systemic barriers including socio-economic hardship, unemployment, and racism play a vital role in regard to women's access to healthcare services. Habib's article raises a number of points, including the fact that Canadian Bengalis now find themselves in a new situation – one that is characterized by the need to rethink the meaning of nationalism, long distance nationalism, settlement, resettlement, and integration. Migration could be seen as peoples' dreams and ambitions; community integration, however, is not just about legislation, but also comes along with the building of relationships, trust, and understanding.

Ranjan Datta's article demonstrates how Indigenous communities could control environmental programs through wisdom and sharing of knowledge.

Datta further illustrates why land-based education is essential in creating a sustainable environment for all, and the ways in which we could advance Indigenous rights and culture with particular focus on the social, political, cultural, and environmental impacts of colonization.

Iqbal Bhuiyan's paper focuses on recognition of credentials and licensing in engineering, which is a highly regulated profession in Canada. Professional licenses are issued by licensing boards, and the criteria for licensing are fairly strict. Further, the costs and time related to licensing pose a significant challenge to many internationally trained engineers, resulting in unemployment and underemployment of this group of highly skilled immigrants. Bhuiyan offers a range of job search strategies that foreign-trained professionals could utilize to secure employment and economic stability.

Sarika Bose's work explores the roles of Bengali immigrants' transnationalism and identities in shaping their settlement and integration experience. Bose points out that Bengali-Canadian identity has not been adequately theorized in the available literature. By challenging homogenizing tendencies related to people of Bengali descent in Canada, Bose examines how Bengali-Canadian immigrant identities are formed. She acknowledges that similarities and differences among Bengalis in Canada regarding their ongoing quest for identity require that additional nuance and profundity be added to the discussion.

Chinmoy Banerjee, in a personal narrative, presents a unique approach to critically analyzing the internal and external conflicts over identity with particular attention to discourses of migration, migrant experiences, and racialized bodies, as well as history and politics of difference. What stood out the most for readers was the way Banerjee offers a platform to understand the relationship among multiple conflicting racial and national identities.

## **Conclusion**

This special issue highlights Canadian Bengalis as a racialized community and offers groundwork for further research that is urgently needed. It is evident from the articles included in this issue that despite a relatively recent migration history, the Canadian Bengali community is eager to contribute to the wider multicultural (and indeed multilingual, despite the country's official "bilingualism") society. This volume will remain an invaluable source of reference for those seeking to understand the history of Bengali migration to Canada and obtain a glimpse of settlement patterns of Canadian Bengalis.

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