Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis: A Summary and Some Highlights

A two-day Conference on Bengali Migration to Canada was held in Vancouver (16-17 September 2017), B.C., Canada. The Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies (GSWS), Simon Fraser University (SFU), and the Centre for India and South Asian Research (CISAR) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) jointly organized the Conference. The Conference was funded by various departments/units of SFU and UBC and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) under Canada 150 Celebration. Day 1 of the Conference was held at the SFU Harbor Centre in Downtown Vancouver, and Day 2 at the UBC Institute of Asian Research. The primary objective of the Conference, the first ever of its kind in Canada, was to document the history of the Bengali migration – those speaking Bangla as their mother tongue irrespective of national boundaries – to Canada, their settlement patterns and contributions of Bengali migrants to Canadian multiculturalism. The Conferences was not only attended by Bengalis living in B.C.’s Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island, but also by Bengali scholars from the Ottawa Capital Region, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The two-day program was packed with many scholarly, informative and stimulating presentations over the Six Sessions and two Round Tables involving community leaders, front-line settlement workers and community activists. On Day 1, the Conference Organizers – Professor Habiba Zaman (GSWS, Simon Fraser University) and Dr. Sanzida Habib (CISAR, University of British Columbia) welcomed the participants at the SFU Harbor Centre. In her opening remarks, Dr. Jane Pulkingham, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) underscored the importance of the Conference in documenting the history of Bengalis in Canada due to lumping this linguistic and cultural group under the umbrella category of South Asians by Statistics Canada as well as academic researchers. As a result, the Dean observed, the presence and contributions of Bengalis in Canada are not visible and easily recognized. The keynote speech for the day was by Professor Tania Dasgupta of York University, a Torontonian Bengali, who questioned what it means to be a Canadian Bengali. This was followed by a lively discussion on the Bengali identity in the diaspora. The discussions then moved on to migration and settlement, history, demography, religion, and health and wellbeing with many personal stories of initial encounters as new immigrants, survival and adjustments in their newly adopted homes. The papers in the afternoon sessions largely focused on gender, culture, family, work, and community organizations with a discussion of multiculturalism, relationship with Indigenous/First Nation people and social justice issues.
Day 2 at UBC started with a welcome address by Dr. Mandakranta Bose, Professor Emerita and former Director-CISAR, UBC. Professor C. Emdad Haque of the University of Manitoba, in his keynote speech, provided a brief but eloquent account of the history of Canadian multiculturalism, migration, identity and contributions of Bengalis to Manitoba. The highlight of the day was the session on the Canadian Bengali Youths, their identity, and social, cultural and family life. Four “second generation” Canadian Bengali youths discussed their tribulations and state of “un-belonging” and “imposed Bengaliness” and what being a Bengali meant to them. Their narratives dealing with struggles at home to be “proper Bengali” and the need to “fit in” in school and at work were really intriguing. The two round tables coordinated by Supriya Bhattacharya and Dr. Sanzida Habib were very vibrant and touched upon issues like multiculturalism, employment patterns, accreditation and underemployment, and mixed experiences about better life in Canada and issues of racism and struggles in becoming part of the Canadian state.

Finally, Professor Habiba Zaman wrapped up the Conference and thanked all participants, the keynote speakers/presenters, the session chairs and the staff/volunteers who helped to make the Conference a success. She also expressed her earnest hope that the issues brought up by the Conference on Migration of Bengalis will result in more opportunities for further dialogues and discourses on migration and identity issues of Bengalis in Canada.