My Reflection on the Conference

My participation at the last week’s (Sept. 16, 2017) two-day conference titled *Canada 150 Conference on the Migration of Bengalis to British Columbia*, organized by Professor Habiba Zaman (SFU) and Dr. Sanzida Habib (Centre for Indian and South and South Asian Research) at UBC was one of the highlights of my recent professional activity. Having brought together a large number of scholars, artists, and community members to examine and document the history, settlement patterns and contributions of Bengali Canadians (originating from Bangladesh and India’s West Bengal now called Bangla), the Conference was a great success, to put it succinctly.

Seeing the dearth of primary immigration records of the migration patterns of the Bengali Canadians, Professor Zaman took a special initiative to arrange a conference that would address this issue in particular and a host of other associated issues and challenges faced by this particular segment of the Canadian population. Having participated in the Conference, I have no hesitation to state that the said Conference had met the first round of Professor Zaman’s expectations – to gather knowledge about the Bengali population whose specific history and circumstances within Canada has thus far been overlooked by the historical establishment in Canada.

In their speeches, both key-note speakers, Dr. Tania Das Gupta and Dr. C. Emdad Haque, had touched on the issues surrounding the theme of the Conference in a way that had stunned the audience who were absolutely spellbound; under pin drop silence, the attendees listened to their presentations that were rich with historic data and fascinating anecdotes based on primary sources. Both have clearly demonstrated, through their research work, their deep knowledge and understanding of the subject at hand. Consequently, they had roused profound interest among the participants and attendees who had interacted with the speakers during the Q and A session with discernibly eager avidity.

The presentation of all other designated speakers/presenters that included both first and second-generation Bengali Canadians, had also generated enthusiasm among the attendees to the point that there were numerous follow-up questions. All of the narratives were superb with a keen sense of what is interesting. In discussing the issues of identity formation, cultural adaptation and retaining of family values *vis-à-vis* Canadian core values, some of the second-generation Canadian Bengalis were utterly frank in demonstrating the piercing pathos of the situation. As a speaker/presenter, and an attendee for the other speakers/attendees, I consider myself fortunate to have been a part of this Conference that will be a part of the historiography of the migration of the Bengalis in Canada. We owe it to Professor Zaman for her vision and readiness to document a part of Canada’s demographic and social history in which there now exists a large gap.

**My comments, questions and observations:**

How are the Bengali Canadians, having constructed and selected their notion of *who they are*, practicing their ideologies in their country of adoption (or in their country of birth, as is the case with the second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin)?
On the second day with the presentation, it became clear as to how the second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin select, negotiate and communicate the intersectionalities of their identity in Canada. Simply put: *how do they go about defining their multiple identities?*

One of the greatest problems I see in this area is the non-availability of migration/immigration data which Professor Zaman had already talked about. In fact, it is specifically for this reason that she has taken this initiative. Historically speaking, all Bengalis who came to Canada prior to 1947 came with an Indian passport. In the Immigration records, there was no breakdown by province, (such as West Bengal) or language (such as Bengali speaking). Following the creation of Pakistan, Bengalis of East Pakistan who came to Canada had entered as *Pakistanis* (with no breakdown of linguistic background, such as Bengalis; or geographic background, such as East or West Pakistan). In fact, it is only from 1972 onwards that we have a record of the arrival of Bangladeshis in Canada. The Bengalis from West Bengal still come with an Indian passport and the Canadian Immigration records them as Indians as opposed to Bengali speaking Indians. This means that the past Immigrations records now in the archives does not assist us in any way in determining the number of Bengali speaking immigrants from India, Pakistan to obtain the arrival of the number of Bengali migrants from India or Pakistan. The present Census Canada is the only source to determine the current Bengalis since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The present migration of Bengalis from India (or the State of *Bangla*, formerly West Bengal) is problematic since, as mentioned, there is no data under the category Bengalis.

In tracing the history of migration and the reasons for migration, it would be necessary to look into the fact of immigration to Canada by the Bengalis of West Bengal or Bangladesh through another source: that is, emigration for economic gains and flight to Canada to escape political and religious persecution. The “push/pull” concept may be used to explain in part why Bangladeshis immigrate to Canada in large numbers – how they are pulled to Canada by the lure of a higher standard of living, employment and educational opportunities. This is something that many presenters talked about. They may assist us in determining the reason for migration but not the number of Bengali speaking migrants from India and Pakistan.

For my forthcoming book titled *Canada’s role in the emergence of Bangladesh*, I have conducted an extensive research on the migration of Pakistanis (Bengalis and non-Bengalis) since 1947. I may be able to assist the research team in this matter.

Professor Zaman may *explore the possibility of creating a taskforce to look into collecting immigration data from those who are still around.* This may be possible by working with families that still have the memories of the senior members of their families, about their arrival, struggles and subsequent settlements. *Oral History Project* is a common historic research method that may assist us in creating a data base for future. The sooner it is done, the better it is for all of us to collect documentation for future research in this area for historical research in the area of Bengalis’ migration to Canada.

One important point that transpired and became clear from the presentation of the second-generation Canadians of Bengali origin is that changed social and political identity of individuals and people can adjust their identity in accordance with the situation. Having heard carefully from the presentation of a few second generation Bengali Canadians, I came away with the message
that ethnicity is something that is being negotiated and constructed in everyday living. In a
changed situation, some of the common characteristics of an ethnic identity that may be relevant
in some places may not be appropriate in other places. Through a follow-up dialogue with the
second-generation Canadians, Professor Zaman can engage them in studying how they select the
strategies to find out some common characteristics with other persons or groups and how they
establish solidarity with some people and make distinction from others.

Since there was quite a bit of discussion on the challenges faced by the Bengali immigrants, it
would be necessary to focus the exact nature of the barriers and the ways in which they are being
overcome. It is gratifying to hear how some professionals had been addressing this and is
assisting many professionals in steering them through the fastest path to upgrade their education
to obtain equivalencies. Further discourse may assist us in getting a fuller understanding of the
problem of foreign credential recognition and recognition of “portable skills” (skills that may be
used in Canada regardless of where it was picked up and honed) across the country.

Again, although the second-generation Bengali Canadians who have studied in Canada generally
don’t face this problem, they often face subtle and covert racial or systemic discrimination. Well-structured dialogue with the second-generation Bengalis, facilitated by experts in the field, would
generate some fruitful discussion on this problem. The outcome of their discussions may be used
to share with the rest to incorporate in their job-search strategy.

There was quite a bit of discussion on the retention of language, culture and religion that is
evident in the ways in which the Bengali Canadians have formed various associations and groups
to assert their collective identity as Canadians of Bengali origin. Needless to mention, the two-
day Conference merely pointed out the gravity of the matter. Research must be undertaken in
this area involving the Bengalis (both first and second-generations) to conduct comprehensive
study of this phenomenon.

Since immigrants, whether first or second, or, for that matter, even the third-generation of
Bengalis are always seen as “immigrants” simply due to the colour of their skins, it is
imperative to conduct studies on how a mainstream Canadian perceives a visible minority
Canadian. Perception, regardless of other facts, continues to play a vital role in the eyes of the
mainstream Canadians who continue to see the children and grandchildren of immigrants as
“immigrants.” This is not the case with the Caucasian immigrants whose children and
grandchildren are instantly seen as members of the mainstream Canadians – no question ever
asked about their country of origin. Given that this will continue to exist perpetually in the
people’s mind, it is essential that research be undertaken to determine how a harmonious racial
relationship could be established among the Caucasian and non-Caucasian Canadians. Those
presented their papers from a diverse point of view, may again be engaged to conduct further
research on the phenomenon of race, ethnicity and identity in order to enhance one’s
understanding of race and race-related phenomena.

Another important worth-mentioning fact that transpired from the two-day Conference is the fact
that the Bengali Canadians, despite all odds and insurmountable difficulties, devote their time in
doing various types of voluntary work. Their determination to do voluntary work remains
paramount. Many presenters mentioned how the Bengali Canadians, regardless of their age,
juggle their schedules and manage to find some time to volunteer. Both first and second-
generation Bengalis clearly stated in their presentations the phenomenon of Volunteerism that is
inherent in their minds. This area of their lives may be looked at by researchers to gain an
expanded understanding of their cumulative pride, energy and enterprise and be incorporated to
demonstrate their on-going contribution to Canada, the country they call “home.” A narrative
history of this phenomenon would be a way to counter the negative stereotype of visible
minorities who would then be seen as contributors to Canada’s pluralism.

The next area that may be explored is the area of accomplishment and tangible progress that had
been made by the Canadians of Bengali origin. They may be placed under what is referred to as the
success stories – how the Bengali Canadians are contributing to Canada in their respective
field of endeavours? There were references to the accomplishments of the Bengalis in several
fields – education and teaching, medicine, law, business enterprise, management, hospitality
industry, provincial civil service and federal public service. Over the years, on numerous
occasions, many of the Bengali Canadians have received recognition awards from their
workplace. This is an area that may be taken into account and a historical narrative may be
produced to demonstrate how the Bengalis are a part of Canadian mosaic recognized for their
outstanding achievement. Such demonstration of the level of success and prominence of the
Bengali Canadians may also be a source of inspiration for the next generation of Bengalis to see
them as a “role model” as the members of the younger generation pursue their own career goals.
In fact, I believe this will form a part of the historical narrative of the migration of the Bengalis,
their settlements and subsequent contribution to Canada. Since this would be based on authentic
history, this would also constitute the diasporic historiography for future research in the area of
Bengali Canadians.

Personally, I would consider myself privileged if, in any way, I am given an opportunity to
engage myself in documenting the history and contribution of the Bengali Canadians in this
historical narrative.

Mustafa Chowdhury

A Canadian of Bangladeshi origin, Mustafa Chowdhury has graduate degrees in English Literature, Library &
Information Science, and Canadian History. During his lengthy career of 34 years in Canada’s federal public
service, he worked for a number of key federal departments. Chowdhury is the recipient of several awards for his
contributions to the public service and to his profession. He has authored the following books: '71-er Judhoshishu:
Obidito Itihash, first published by Academic Press and Publishers Library, Bangladesh, in 2015; Picking Up the
Pieces: 1971 War Babies’ Odyssey from Bangladesh to Canada, published by Xlibris, Bloomington, Indiana, USA
in 2015; UNCONDITIONAL LOVE: Story of Adoption of 1971 War Babies, published in Bangladesh by

His e-mail address: Mustafa.chowdhury49@gmail.com