

Migration of Bengalis to Canada: An Historical Account

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What do we mean when we say “visible minority”? Are all minorities visible and can indifference ever be benign? Internalizing the most simplified version of reality is as charming and inevitable a feature of infancy as it is toxic and anathema to consciousness in maturity. Canadian public discourse on South Asian migrants has long exhibited a penchant for blinkered simplification that distorts the complex realities of migrants and migrant cultures from the planet’s most culturally diverse subcontinent. The result is a simple, ubiquitous and startlingly incorrect notion: “East Indian.”

In Canada, this problematic term “East Indian” is made to stand in as shorthand for all brown-skinned migrants of non-Hispanic descent. Within this sweeping conflation of widely divergent groups, the overarching narrative of Canadian immigration from the South Asian subcontinent has been that of Punjabi migration, i.e., South Asians from the once-unified provinces of the Punjab in India and Pakistan. Migrant stories, migrant lives and by extension the legal, policy-making and wider institutional implications of immigration from South Asia to Canada have been almost entirely subsumed by this vexing equation:

South Asian = Punjabi = “East” Indian

Among the many stories lost in this double-barreled misnomer is that of Bengali or *Bangla*-phone migration. *Bangla* is the language-group typically spoken by those of Bengali descent. Thus the native Bengali’s first or dominant language is *Bangla* and as a collectivity may be referred to as *Bangla*-phone. Amusingly, Bengalis are the actual “East Indians,” as Bengal lies to the east of the subcontinent. A *Bangla*-phone population thus includes those from the erstwhile Bengal province, currently spread over eastern India (West Bengal) and the Republic of Bangladesh (see fig.1). Therefore *Bangla*-phone peoples include Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims and Hindus.

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Where does this group figure in the wide space occupied by South Asian immigrants in Canada? Canadian Bengalis, in recent times, have occasionally appeared in limited news coverage such as the *Globe and Mail's* censorious reportage in April 2007 of the Ontario Liberal government's gift of CAD 250,000 to the Bengali Cultural Society of Ontario in partnership with COSTI Immigrant Services, a community-based multicultural agency providing services to immigrant communities and newcomers in the province. Describing the gift as the result of "a laxly administered fund that has doled out millions of dollars to immigrant groups with no formal application process," the article refers to the Ontario recipients as a "relatively unknown" group with Liberal connections.



Figure 1 : Bengla-phone Areas in South Asia (www.indmaps.com)

This paucity of Bengali Canadian visibility is a glaring gap in public knowledge on South Asian migration, especially balanced against the fact that between 2001 and 2011 alone the number of immigrants from Bangladesh to Canada increased by 110%, rising from 21,595 to 45,325 (Canadian Magazine of Immigration, 2016). At the same time, however, this must be placed against the fact that Canadian Sikhs – a fraction of the total number of Canadian Punjabi migrants – account for roughly 1.4% of Canada’s total population (National Household Survey, 2011). The difference in these two South Asian migrant populations is striking, and it leads to a frustrating national narrative that understands migrant experience through the blunt instrumentality of numbers. While the numbers of the Punjabi immigrant community exceed that of the *Bangla*-phone community by an enormous margin, their cultural experiences and history of migration are so significantly different that to employ one category as a synecdoche for the other is erroneous bordering on dangerous. Centuries ago, British civil servant and historian Sir John Strachey’s famous Cambridge lectures warned his audience of new bureaucratic recruits that “India” was merely a label of convenience, that it was a country that contained a “multitude of different countries” and that “Scotland is more like Spain than Bengal is like the Punjab” (Strachey, 1888). The passage of time, if anything, has only heightened the diversity of that multitude.

This paper enters the discursive space of the “relatively unknown” Bengali community in Canada by tracing the history of Bengali migration. It is an early, crude and broad-brush attempt to address some of the most basic historical questions about *Bangla*-phone migrants in Canada. Who are they? Where did they come from? What motivated them? Why should anyone care? It explores the provenance of pioneering migrants from the Bengal province of British India and discusses subsequent waves of Bengali migration. In tracing the history of Bengali migration, this paper also draws out important differences between Bengali migrants and other South Asian migrants, as well as differences within the Bengali community itself. As a whole, this paper is an attempt to highlight the unique history of Bengali migrants and open up a space for more sensitive, flexible and nuanced appreciation of migration and migrants within Canada’s multiculturalist framework.

Studying Canadian Migration

With immigration being a key foundation of the “essence” of the Canadian nation, there is an abundance of literature on migration to Canada. For a young nation founded, problematically, on settler colonialism, being “Canadian” often invites creative logic. Mainstream scholarship is agreed on the fact that the nature of the Canadian nation and its social, economic and cultural development have been shaped by communities of immigrants settling within its vast boundaries. The historical importance of immigration to Canadian nation-building has been well documented by scholars such as Valerie Knowles (1997), Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock (2000) and Gerald Tulchinsky (1994), and the deeply racialized nature of immigration policy and processes has been addressed by Vie Satzewich (1992) and Peter Ward (1978), to name a few.

A major lacuna in current understanding of how immigration has shaped Canadian society has relatively recently been addressed by Cole Harris’ (1997; 2001) work on the effects of European migration on Canada’s First Nations. More recently, there has been a great amount of attention directed at the shift of immigration from European to “nontraditional” sources, especially Asia (Laquian, Laquian and McGee, 1998; Halli and Dreidger, 1999). Within the growing scholarship on migration, there has been an expressed trend of dissatisfaction with neoclassical migration theory and its limited ability to convey how migration is shaped by social factors, specifically gender (Willis and Yeoh, 2000).

Within this vast body, there is still a tangible dearth of studies of the sub-national geography of immigrant flows, especially ones that employ the now well-known transnational lens, as initially developed by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton (1992), through which the nature of immigration is placed within its broad geographical and historical context and interpreted as an ongoing and recursive process of connection, not just a singular linear movement. The use of a transnational lens enhances our understanding of the specific nature of various immigration flows to Canada, because it demands that we contextualize our investigations across multiple spaces as well as across various scales, from national systems of governance to local processes of settlement. In studying the history of Bengali migration to India, the transnational framework becomes an indispensable one, as the very nature of *Bangla*-phone identities has been divided across two contiguous provinces since 1905 and two contiguous nations since 1947, taking on a different dynamic with political events preceding and consequent to the creation of the independent Republic of Bangladesh in 1971.

The story of Bengali migration is a story not merely of transnational movement, but indeed of the core of trans-nationalism itself: the formation and interaction of multiple nations. Compared to this, the vast majority of Punjabi migrants in Canada are Jat Sikhs who arrived not just from a single province (Punjab) but from a particular hamlet within that province, the Doaba region (Brij Lal, 1976; Walton-Roberts, 2009).

A transnational approach emphasizes the social and evolutionary nature of migration, rather than just highlighting the numerical existence of such flows. Scholars interested in the multiple dimensions of immigration are increasingly considering the multiplicity of underlying factors including nations themselves within the story of migrant movements; this is a newer worldview where immigrants “through their daily life activities and social, economic and political relations create social fields that cross national boundaries” (Basch et al., 1994, 27). This is an important trend, since it forces a displacement of long-held unilinear frameworks of migration in light of the connections, circulations and transformations that international migration has introduced into Canada’s urban landscape.

In understanding the various waves of Canadian migration, there is now a pressing need to appreciate the fact that immigrant settlement within Western cities has always been shaped by engagement with other, often far-off places. This is critical to understanding the motivations and circuitous journeys often undertaken by Bengalis in Canada. Arjun Appadurai (1996) theorizes the links between nation-states and circulating populations that struggle to re-territorialize their identities across the uneven landscapes of global modernity. This uneven landscape of difference operates at different registers: from the micro-scale of the body/race, gender, class and sexuality, to the regional registers of urban/rural and the national registers of developed/underdeveloped. A historical analysis of all migration to Canada, but particularly that of Bengalis, who have had to adapt multiple times over the past century, even within their places or origin, due to rapidly changing markers of identity produced by experiences of recurring political rupture, might be particularly aided by deploying subtler qualitative frameworks like those imagined by Appadurai (1996). At present, most of such work in migration studies, of which indeed there is only a small sample, seems to emerge from anthropology and human geography. Alison Mountz and Richard Wright’s (1996) detailed study of El Salvadorian asylum seekers in New Jersey and Katharyne Mitchell’s (1997) study of immigrants from Hong Kong in Vancouver reveal how everyday relations are shaped through engagement with a multiplicity

of nations. In varied studies on immigration to Canada, Jennifer Hyndman and Margaret Walton-Roberts (2000), Johanna Waters (2001), Madeleine Wong (2000), Catherine Nolin Hanlon (2001), Thomas Owusu (1998) and Daniel Hiebert (2000) demonstrate the nature of complex transnational linkages that immigrants maintain, and illustrate how these connections play a role in everyday decisions and interactions.

Transnationalism, Nationalism and the Bengal Diaspora

The history of movement of *Bangla*-phone peoples is an unusual one. Three partitions, the first in 1905 as British viceroy Curzon partitioned Bengal into east and west, and then two national partitions (1947 and 1971) within 25 years in the densely populated province, sparked off colossal displacements and migrations. However, not all movement crossed national borders. Roughly 20 million Muslims and Hindus – about a third of the region’s population in 1947 – sought shelter across new borders in the “right” country, almost all of them resettling in the Bengal delta itself. A similar number were internally displaced within the new national borders, with profound consequences for the region (Chatterji, 2011). Comparatively few – about 2% – moved overseas, some to the Middle East and most others to Europe. This is in considerable contrast to Punjabi migration which saw over 5,000 individuals settled just in Canada as early as 1902 (Brij Lal, 1975).

Scholars of refugees from South Asia, concentrating chiefly on the Punjab with its stark exchanges of population and spectacular violence, have, for their part, failed to engage comparatively with the wider field of migration studies. As for studies of migration born from the “Partition in the East” (see Samaddar, 1999; Bagchi et al., 2005), the focus has been almost exclusively on Hindus – mainly from the upper and middle classes – who moved to the towns and cities of West Bengal (Chakrabarti, 1990). In the teeming field of migration studies, poorer migrants and refugees, particularly Muslims, have remained invisible or marginalized, producing a small, insufficiently representative body of knowledge. Within the limited body of research on Bengali migration, the lion’s share of viable scholarship belongs to studies of Bengali migration to Britain (see Chatterji, Alexander and Jalais, 2013; Allen, 2003; Ansari, 2004; Choudhury, 1993; 1995; Fischer, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007; Gardner, 1992; 1995; Kabir, 2000; Islam, 1997).

This is an understandable tendency given the long and rich historical links of Britain to South Asia in general and Bengal in particular. However, research on the other side of the Partition narrative, that on Punjab, has seen a

great efflorescence of interconnected, intersectional and well-funded research on themes ranging from expatriate Punjabi nationalism (Tarling, 1993; Kaur, 2012) to Punjabi military history (Purewal, 2012; Johnson, 2011), Punjabi secessionist groups (Knowles, 2005; Bowker, 2000), Punjabi diasporic culture especially *bhangra* (Dudrah, 2008; Gera Roy, 2010; Bakrania, 2013), Punjabi religiosity (Kau Arora, 2009; Tatla, 2013) and Punjabi gender norms (Singh and Kirchengast, 2011; Jarvis, 2011) on either end of the Atlantic. In comparison, Bengali migration to North America is considerably understudied – Vivek Bald’s 2013 work on a putative “Bengali Harlem” in the USA is a marvelous exception – and studies on Bengalis in Canada are virtually nonexistent. This has an impact on the paucity of an available historical archive on *Bangla*-phone lives in North America available to the present-day researcher and fuels the lopsided narrative of Punjabis as “East Indians” and vice versa *ad infinitum*.

On a world historical scale, South Asian migration born of moments of extreme political rupture has much in common with other migrations in the developing world. Forged on the anvils of nation-making, they were for the most part self-driven: states had little or no role in helping to settle the new arrivals, and their efforts to control movement across borders had little effect. In many respects, the Bengal diaspora is a typical case of the postcolonial upheavals and mass migrations of the late 20th century, in what Castles and Miller (2009) call an “Age of Migration.” By 2013, 213 million people – more than three out of every 100 (OECD-UNDESA 2013) – were international migrants, a number itself dwarfed by migration within national borders. This phenomenon is referred to as “internal migration.” In India, almost one in five of the country’s 1.2 billion people is an internal migrant (Abbas and Verma, 2013). In Bangladesh, constant migration from countryside to town – at over 3% a year between 1975 and 2009 – has led to one of the highest rates of urbanization in the world (Marshall and Rehman, 2013). Internal migration is an experience that needs particular consideration in studies of movement of people from Bengal, and it is also what helps distinguish the nature of Bengali communities in diaspora.

It is unusual for studies on migration to pay careful attention to immobility, to intimate connections that adhere people to places and to the factors that militate against movement. Yet this is indispensable to understanding the nature of *Bangla*-phone diaspora. Why, despite being subjected to the same push factors – such as communal violence, intimidation, social discrimination, and political and economic marginalization – as Punjabis flayed by the arbitrary

imposition of the Radcliffe Line along the north-west of India, did so many not move at all?

The study of the history and sociological processes underpinning Bengali migration to the United Kingdom has seen many of these delicate, difficult and nuanced questions addressed, most recently by the findings published by a six-year international project on Bengali Muslim migration undertaken by Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji and Annu Jalais (2016). Research of such depth is absent in studies of any other South Asian community but Punjabis in North America (see Johnston, 1998; 2011). Vivek Bald's (2013) recent work on the Bengali "Harlem" in the USA has been supported by a documentary film by the same name, and sheds light on the multiple axes of community formation by Bengali Muslims in traditional Afro-American geographies. While seeking to historicize the Bengali diaspora, in all its specificity, research efforts like these remind us of the great importance of being mindful of the complex choices, negotiations and constraints that shape the lives of these "relatively unknown" migrants who made history. The startling lack of balance in quantity of studies on Bengalis in Britain and Bengalis in North America is also a forceful reminder of migration scholarship's own need to travel to unaccustomed earth.

Coming to Canada

Overseas movement from the Bengal province has a long prehistory. From as early as the 17th century, low-paid ship-hands or *lascars* (from Sylhet, Chittagong and Noakhali districts in Bengal) were employed by the British East India Company (Adams, 1987), and regular travel between these provinces and Britain can be traced back to the 19th century. From the 1850s onwards, Bengali lascars were crucial in the workforce of the imperial merchant marine, and soon came to occupy a lowly niche as fire-stokers in the boiler rooms of British merchant ships during the two world wars. This was a tough, oftentimes unbearably demanding life that threatened the wellbeing of this seafaring group. Caroline Adams' 1991 oral history project with former lascars in London was expanded by Ashfaque Hossain's 2014 study of Sylheti seamen in the Age of Empire, and describes first-hand the abject horror of life in the boiler room: There were different classes: *coalwallah*, *telwallah*, *donkeywallah*. *Telwallah* means engine greaseman, *coalwallah* has to bring up the coal and give it to the fireman to get the steam up, *agwallah* is the fireman.... It was dangerous, the engine room goes up and goes down...you had to be careful. It was hot, oh yes it was hot...many people died in that heat inside that room. In my sea life I knew

hundreds of people who died. They say in the Navy you see the world, but not true, you only see down inside the ship and water and you can't get out (Adams, 1991).

Not unsurprisingly, a great number of such lascars would oft-times “disappear” upon arrival and many years later be resurrected in the local annals of a distant town in the British Isles (Adams 1991; Chatterji, 2015; Hossain, 2014). In British ports at London, Southampton and further north, a complex but convivial network of Sylheti hostel owners called *bariwallahs* would seek out and house these young male runaways and help them find employment, charging a steep commission when a job was obtained. This tendency to jump ship is visible among the earliest *Bangla*-phone entrants across the Atlantic too, but there is an important limitation. Ravi Ahuja's (2006) fascinating examination of mobility and containment in the voyages of South Asia seamen in the early 20th century reveals an exploitative troika of *bariwallahs*, port foremen (*ghat serangs*) and ship *serangs* who recruited men for particular shipping lines in return for a share of their future pay. Through this system, many lascars became embroiled in complex relationships of debt and obligation on which they could not easily renege. For their part, ship *serangs* had a strong incentive to closely monitor the lascars they had recruited, since any one of them jumping ship would mean the *serang* would lose his cut from the absconder's future wages. This complex web of bodily control, debt and obligation – as much as the highly punitive shipping and immigration laws that deterred “Asiatics” from breaking their contracts and disembarking at European and American ports – explains why so few lascars jumped ship at London, Vancouver or New York. “Lascar agreements” denied lascars shore leave in North American and African ports, shipmasters could discharge lascars only in Indian ports and England's Merchant Shipping Act of 1894 entitled ship owners to transfer even unwilling lascars to any other vessel so long as it was bound for India (Ahuja, 2006; Balachandran, 1997, 1 – 18; Tabili, 1994).

One must also consider the life that awaited absconders: at least a couple of years of evading arrest, the challenges of surviving while on the run, growing racism in white seamen's unions against lascars, the long harsh winters of Europe and North America, and the ever-present specter of destitution (Tabili, 1994). Those who did jump ship, battle steep odds and stay on were inevitably young, male and able bodied, and even they would return home after a stint abroad making some money (Ahuja, 2006; Chatterji, 2015). Only a handful stayed on permanently, and sometimes for the most charming of reasons: love. Annu Jalais'

interviews with the extended family in Bangladesh of an octogenarian lascar named Mohammed Fazlul Haq recall the delightful story of an uncle, Hamid Khan, in London who was “stopped” from returning by a white woman (*mem*) who was “madly in love (*preme pagol*) with him” (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). Other equally personal, but less rosy, explanations for staying on included trouble with family members, creditors and law enforcement authorities back home.

Vivek Bald’s (2013) work on what he calls the “Bengali Harlem” of the USA also reinforces the impermanent nature of Bengali migrants to North America in the late 19th and early 20th century. Beginning sometime in the 1880s, Muslim peddlers from a cluster of villages north of Calcutta began travelling to the United States to sell “Oriental goods”: embroidered cotton and silks, small rugs, perfume and a range of other items (Bald, 2013, 14). Indian demand for their handicrafts had declined under colonial rule as the British imported cheaply-manufactured textiles and established greater control over the subcontinent’s internal markets (Chatterji, 2013). Yet overseas, middle class consumers in Britain, Australia, Europe and South Africa were in the midst of a *fin de siècle* fascination for exotic ideas, goods and entertainments of India and “the East.” Known as *chikandars* (after the style of embroidery on their products – *chikankari*), these men became a fixture at American leisure spots on the US’s eastern seaboard. Other Indian traders had made their way outwards from the subcontinent to sell handicrafts to Mediterranean travelers in North Africa and the Mediterranean (Tambe and Fischer-Tiné, 2009; Visram, 2002). Bengalis ventured into new territories, establishing an extensive network that stretched through the east coast of the US, into and across the southern states, and as far south as Panama (Markowitz, 2000, 122 – 30). As US immigration laws toughened against a rising tide of racial hatred towards “Asiatics,” between 1897 and 1902, peddlers bypassed Ellis Island and made their way into the United States through either Canada or smaller US ports. After 1903, they entered Ellis Island in groups of four or five rather than ten, twelve or twenty, and they came equipped with the names and addresses of relatives or friends who were residents of Atlantic City, Asbury Park, New Orleans or Charleston. Records are not easily available for the interaction and fates of Bengali peddlers in Canada. Did some of them stay behind? Affective networks seem to have stretched south of the Canadian border towards the central American states, but little trace can be found of movement outside of sojourning, which is inherently a temporary exchange.

Many years pass by before we find the historic record specifically reflecting Bengali migration to Canada. In 1914, as almost 400 Indians languished on the Komagata Maru, the term “Bengal,” particularly “Calcutta,” emerges several times in the ship’s record books. However it is a threadbare archive, as “Bengal” is noted in the passenger manifest only as a popular location for boarding the Komagata Maru, in accordance with the legal limits placed by the “Continuous Journey Regulation.” This regulation was added as an amendment to the Canadian Immigration Act in 1908 prohibiting the landing of any immigrant that did not come to Canada by continuous journey from the country of which they were natives or citizens. Immigrants were now required to purchase a through ticket to Canada from their country of origin or else be denied entry. This ruling most affected immigrants from India and Japan. This was also the notoriously anti-Asian racist phase within Canadian governance, as Deputy Minister of Labour William Lyon Mackenzie King additionally recommended restricting immigration from India. King’s report noted that many East Indians in Canada were unemployed and impoverished, attributing their circumstances to an incompatibility with the Canadian climate and way of life (Mackenzie and Lyon, 1908).

However, specific exclusion of Indian immigrants based on their citizenship was impracticable because of their status as British subjects; thus restrictions were cunningly effected through the Continuous Passage corollary. At that time, the only company to provide one continuous journey from India to Canada was the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and they offered passage from Bengal’s ports. Thus, “Calcutta” too features several times in the migration records attached to passenger manifests, but these mentions are attached to the names of North Indian Muslims and Sikhs who passed through the port city on their way to Canada. There is no evidence, to date, of Bengalis themselves undertaking such journeys during this period. For instance, in 1908, 95% of Indian migrants to Canada were single Sikh males looking for employment in farming, lumber and railroad construction (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1959).

Racist controls of non-white immigration were a prominent feature of early twentieth century Canadian governance. Chandrasekhar (1986, 17) points out that the availability of Chinese immigration which furnished the bulk of labour in Canada virtually ceased in 1904 with the imposition of a Head Tax of \$500. These Canadian companies now flooded the countryside of Punjab with literature that promised jobs and beckoned the overburdened Punjabi peasantry to a new world. This recruitment drive was absent in other parts of India, though

the experience of impoverishment under British colonial agricultural laws and land reform could apply perfectly well to the condition of peasants elsewhere including the Bengali *ryots* (see for instance Metcalf, 1980; Dutta, 2012).

So, why singularly target the Punjab? The British colonial stereotype of a “hardy martial race,” strategically appended to Punjabi loyalists since the aftermath of the 1857 uprising, was in stark contrast to the labelling of Bengali men – who mostly sided with the 1857 rebels and who, by the late 19th century, were causing much annoyance to British administrators through their anti-colonial nationalist grumblings – as “effete,” “corrupt” and “perverse” (Sinha, 1989). This widespread institutional valorization of Punjabi masculinity appears to have played a role in the targeting of the province by all forms of Canadian recruiters. From 1909, the Canadian Pacific Rail Company undertook an active advertising campaign in the Punjab provinces – following the passage of the Continuous Journey Regulation – geared to attract more Punjabis to a comfortable life of farming overseas (see fig. 2).

Soon after, however, racism trumped the conveniences of private enterprise and the Canadian government issued directives to CPR expressly prohibiting ticket sales to Indians. This heralded a precipitous decline in immigrants from India after 1908, with Census reports in the Canada Year Book showing 29 “East Indians” admitted to Canada between 1909 and 1913 and 88 in 1914. Since then, there is no recorded data of admission until after 1930 (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1959).



Figure 2: Canadian Pacific Railway poster, circa 1908 (Financial Post archive)

Canadian legal restrictions reduced the supply of new immigrants from British India, and the discrimination faced by Indians in Canada (see Johnson, 2011) prompted some to return home. As a result, the Indian population in Canada was unable to grow. In 1921, there were 1,016 “East Indians” while the 1931 Census indicated a population of 1,400. Cumulatively, a little over 5,000 South Asians arrived in Canada between 1904 and 1909, and the 1911 Census records only 2,342 remaining (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1959).

The year 1947 was perhaps the best-known moment of explosion in all certainties of South Asian identity, as a newly independent Indian subcontinent cracked into East and West Pakistan and the Republic of India. The same year was a minor milestone in Canada’s legislative history as “East Indian” immigrants were given the right to vote in provincial and federal elections; this right was

extended by 1948 to municipal elections. In 1948, another discriminatory law requiring fingerprints on legal documents was also revoked. This coincided with a period of renewed but limited migration from South Asia to Canada between 1947 and 1966 (immigration regulations would change in 1967), with Indo-Canadians being recognized as a moderately viable legal category possessing the bare rudiments of citizenship rights, franchise and equality before law.

Relative to the sparseness of the 1930s, the records of the Canadian Departments of Citizenship and Immigration (Annual Reports 1950 – 66) and Manpower and Immigration (Annual Reports 1950 – 66) reflect a small change in South Asian migration numbers. However, non-white immigration was not an unrestricted enterprise. In 1952, a quota of 150 from India, 100 from Pakistan and 50 from Ceylon was imposed to check immigration. In 1957, the Indian quota was raised to 300. In addition to the regular quota which applied to primary applicants, South Asians were able, albeit much more restrictively, to enter Canada as sponsored relatives.

From 1962, Canadian immigration regulation started to mention education and skills as criteria of admission into Canada. This tendency became formalized into a comprehensive structure of points-based assessment of all potential immigrants in 1967. Under this new regime, points were allocated to applicants based upon age, education, occupational demand, work experience, knowledge of English/French, and ability to adapt to Canada. The absence of race and nationality as overt filters allowed non-white immigrants who had traditionally faced insurmountable discrimination in seeking admission to Canada to now be allowed consideration on the same footing as European applicants. This is the phase from which we see *Bangla*-phone migration to Canada in a more visible and steady pattern. The story from then onward is one of educated, upper and upper middle-class urban Bengali migrants coming to Canada on work permits, study visas and spousal visas. This is what I will call *bhadralok* migration.

Canadian *Bhadralok*: Immigration and Community Formation

Who are the *bhadralok*? Translated literally from *Bangla*, they are “the respectable people” or “gentle folk,” and have dominated the mainstream history of Bengali colonial nationalism, social reform and postcolonial development. Historian John Broomfield’s (1968) description of *bhadralok* identity is helpful to recollect here:

A socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably ready to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities.

This standard understanding of *bhadralok* (see also Chatterjee, 1998; 2001; Chakraborty, 2006; Banerjee, 1989; Ghosh, 2005), with its allusions to upper caste *zamindari* sophistication, implies an overwhelmingly elite and male Hindu group. I have argued elsewhere (Ray, 2008) that much more basic social experiences of high-school education or non-manual employment are better representative denominators of the Bengali *bhadralok* category and thus it includes Muslims, women and non-landed Hindu males. On a less recognized anthropological footing, self-identification as *bhadra* (respectable) is another prominent feature of this category. In three separate telephone interviews conducted with male Bengali Muslim shopkeepers in the greater Toronto region, without much prompting I was informed about their family's elite roots, college education and formidable property ownership in Dhaka and Rajshahi, reinforcing not just *bhadralok* status but also a strong internalization of the cultural value of this historical category. One or a combination of these three criteria – self-identification as *bhadra*, high-school education and non-manual employment – form the overwhelming demographic characteristics of the *Bangla*-phone migrant community in Canada. This is a very different cultural psychology from that of Canadian Punjabis, whose community pride remains encapsulated and dominated by an aggressively physical, exclusively Sikh-dominant notion of “*Desi*” or “native” identity with links to agricultural labour (Vancouver Sun, 2000; see also Johnston, 1988).

From 1971 onwards, the search for *Bangla*-phone migrants to Canada takes on an obvious transnational complexion. Canada was one of the first nations to recognize independent Bangladesh in 1972, within a year of its liberation from Pakistan, and in 1973 the Bangladesh High Commission in Canada was established in Ottawa. The Bangladesh High Commission's short online history of Bengalis in Canada, too, reflects the *bhadralok* bias:

Professionals were the first immigrants from Bangladesh who began to migrate to Canada in the 1960s. Some came to Canada for higher education as well as professional training and then settled down as immigrants. The migration increased over the later decades, and reached its peak in the late 80s. The

immigration of Bangladeshis to Canada takes place in two categories namely skilled workers category and family category (Bangladesh High Commission, 2007).

The Indian High Commission website's long list of Indo-Canadian bilateral relations briskly notes the history of the Indian community in Canada in the following words:

It is estimated that two-thirds of Indo-Canadians are Punjabi speaking, followed by those who speak Gujarati. The community is culturally active and has organized itself in various associations. (High Commission of India, 2016)

While India's diplomatic position on the denominators of the diasporic Indian community in Canada is disappointingly limited, the reference to association formation certainly helps highlight the nature of Bengali conviviality in the country. This may very well be true of other South Asian regional communities in Canada marginalized by the Punjabi preoccupation of mainstream scholarship, policy, diplomacy and media. The Indian High Commission's emphasis on Gujarati-phone people (those whose first or dominant language is Gujarati) forming the second largest Indian community after Punjabis is also a political misrepresentation that elides the historically transnational nature of Gujarati-speaking groups. Gujarati-phone, particularly Gujarati-phone Ismaili Muslims from Uganda, Kenya and Fiji, form the most visible community of Gujaratis in Canada (see Tasmin, 2014; Rahim, 2017).

With a points-based immigration system in play since 1967, a large number of Bengali professionals from India and Bangladesh arrived in Canada, often accompanied by their families (Das Gupta, 1988). By the mid-1970s, such families and individuals found each other, and we see a surge in Bengali association formation across numerous Canadian provinces. *Prabasi*, Toronto's Bengali association, was formed in 1976; The Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society (LMBCS) was founded in 1977; *Bichitra* in Manitoba and the Bengali Association of Calgary were formed in 1978; and the Edmonton Bengali Association was formed in 1979. By the 1990s, several other Bengali and specifically Bangladeshi associations grew in numerous cities across British Columbia, Ontario, Alberta, Quebec and Saskatchewan. The composition of the pioneering founders of such associations highlights the *bhadralok* complexion of Bengali migration from the 1960s. The LMBCS's first executive body consisted of highly educated Bengali urban professionals with advanced academic degrees, including two Oxonians. Other societies count chartered accountants, bankers,

medical professionals and university academics among the ranks of their originators.

A post-1970s slump in the Canadian economy again resulted in an upscaling of restrictions on immigration and the scapegoating of immigrants of colour for contributing to unemployment, reminiscent of xenophobic attitudes against an “Asian menace” in an earlier century (Johnston, 1988; Geiger, 2011). In 1982, a “Canadians First” program was unveiled (Toronto Star, 1982), which resulted in lowering immigration except for those with “essential skills” designated by the government and for those bringing in capital for investment. This orientation, which continues to the present day, further favoured highly skilled *Bangla*-phone migrants originating from India and Bangladesh, often arriving with student visas for advanced university degrees, work permits with eminent Canadian enterprises, or – in the case of technical experts such as engineers and IT professionals – job offers in-hand from major governmental and private companies (Ashutosh, 2014; Sodhi, 2008).

Bengali and Bangladeshi associations in Canada had, by the early 2000s, developed well beyond first-ports-of-call for new immigrants into specialized cultural, linguistic, religious and even professional collectives. The Dhaka University Alumni Association has an active chapter in Toronto, as do the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur and BE College Shibpur (West Bengal). *Bangla*-phone organizations also routinely advertise services to aid all South Asian immigrants irrespective of provincial origin. The Bangladesh Centre and Community Services (BCCS) in Toronto, for instance, which was established in 2010, is one of the best resourced and organized community organizations for *Bangla*-phone immigrants in Canada and extends its services to all new South Asian immigrants in the greater Toronto region.

An enduring love of the great litterateur Rabindranath Tagore forms a particularly poignant axis of community development among the global *Bangla*-phone diaspora, and is reflected in their association-forming activity in Canada. Tagore himself visited Vancouver in 1929 at the invitation of the National Council of Education of Canada to participate in its Triennial International Conference (O’Connell, 2008). It was his only visit to Canada, but he arrived during a time when the Bengali presence in Canada was virtually nonexistent. Tagore was shepherded to Vancouver and Victoria by the very dapper x Singh (Johnston, 2011). As of 2017, there are over 30 active Tagore-based Bengali community organizations in Canada.

Vancouver's Tagore Society is a remarkably cosmopolitan organization which brings together *Bangla*-phone Hindus, Muslims and poetry aficionados with no ethnic connection to South Asia. This Bengali-engineered homage to Tagore's expansive universal humanism is, on a sociological level, indicative again of the cultural sophistication of the *Bangla*-phone immigrant community in Canada. It is also indicative of an absence of isolationist "in-group" paranoia that historically besets most minority communities in the West (see de Jun Kong, 2016; Fahmy, 2015; Case, 2011). The *bhadralok's* valorization of a life of the mind, sometimes to the detriment of material progress, continues to be a feature of the small but successful *Bangla*-phone community of Canada, a fact which distinguishes this community from the prevalent Punjabi "East Indian" stereotype of welcoming backbreaking physical labour to enable financial success (Began and Chapman, 2013; Qureshi, Varghese and Ossella, 2013; Nayar, 2012). Clearly, even many swallows do not the same spring make.

Conclusion

The presence of a Bengali or *Bangla*-phone community in Canada is a relatively recent historical development. Understanding the migration patterns and motivations for migration within this community requires a sophisticated transnational focus in North American migration studies, and demands a sensitive unpacking of the opaque, under-nuanced, sociologically irresponsible equation of "South Asian = Punjabi = East Indian" that plagues discourse on South Asian migration to Canada. Bengalis have been steadily immigrating to Canada from India, Bangladesh and other parts of the world, and have been very successful in community formation in the country. Given Bengalis' close historical association with the British colonial instruments of higher education and bureaucratic employment, and the fact that they have populated the intellectual leadership of nationalist social reform, Bengalis have historically preferred Britain, Western Europe and, much more recently, the USA, as favourable emigration destinations. Canada is both a new country by itself and a new possibility in the story of Bengali migration. Bengalis in Canada are culturally sophisticated and cosmopolitan in mindset. The nature of Bengali conviviality echoes Veblen's theory of the leisure class in its affinity for "spiritual, aesthetic (and) intellectual," pursuits over those of pure commercial gain or physical labour. This is an important characteristic that distinguishes the Bengali/*Bangla*-phone community from other communities in South Asia, and is echoed in the diaspora. There is much about the Bengali community in North America that

merits comprehensive academic research. There have been very few studies on the history of Bengali migration to Canada, or the Canadian Bengali community as a whole. This paper takes a tentative, limited but hopeful step in that direction.

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