

An Oral History of Bengali Immigrants in British Columbia: 1960 – 2017

Supriya Bhattacharyya¹⁸

Introduction

It is common knowledge among Bengalis that the first Bengali to set foot in British Columbia was Swami Vivekananda, a prophet from India who arrived at Vancouver on the Canadian Pacific Liner *Empress of India* on Tuesday July 25, 1893 at 7pm (Vivekananda Vedanta Society of British Columbia, 1993). Swami Vivekananda spent 15 hours en route to Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions. Thirty-six years after Vivekananda's short stay in Vancouver, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited Vancouver in April of 1929. Tagore arrived at Victoria on the SS *Empress of Asia* on April 6, 1929 at 7am (Mahalanobis, 1977). This was the beginning of Tagore's only visit to Canada and his penultimate visit to North America. Unlike Vivekananda, who had spent a night in Vancouver in transit, Tagore was invited to participate in the Triennial International Conference organized by the National Council of Education of Canada (O'Connell and Unsal, 2014). Prior to his trip to Canada in 1929, Tagore had turned down several invitations to visit this country in protest of the Komagata Maru incident of 1914. Tagore was indignant about the way his countrymen were treated by the Canadian Government (O'Connell and Unsal, 2014). After presenting his speech at the Triennial International Conference in Victoria, Tagore took a steamer to Vancouver on April 7, 1929. Tagore gave a second lecture in Vancouver. Thousands of people waited to hear and see him (Mahalanobis, 1977). For health-related reasons, Tagore restricted himself to limited visits and meetings while he was in Vancouver; however, he visited the Sikh Temple on West 2nd Ave (currently known as the Ross Street Temple) and met with several community leaders (Smith, 2013).

In between the visits of Vivekananda and Tagore, Taraknath Das, a Bengali revolutionary and scholar from India, spent some time in the Lower Mainland area during the years 1907-1908. He founded a boarding school for children of Indian immigrants, most of who were illiterate and worked in the lumber mills (Mukherjee, 1998). Das also united the Indian migrants and made them aware of the freedom movement in India (Saha, 2000).

¹⁸ Supriya Bhattacharyya earned an MA in Sociology from the University of British Columbia, and is currently working in a non-profit organization.

Neither Vivekananda nor Tagore chose to live in British Columbia or anywhere else in Canada. Taraknath Das was expelled from Canada, which many considered a ploy by an immigration officer named Hopkinson (Mukherjee, 1998). It is fitting to mention the visits of these three eminent Bengalis as the precursor of Bengali settlement in British Columbia which, according to oral history, started in 1960. This article will discuss the background of migration and the socio-cultural adjustments of Bengali immigrants in British Columbia.

Data for this essay was collected during the period of June 2017 to August 2017. Forty face-to-face interviews were conducted. Twelve interviews were conducted over the phone while three interviews were done through video chat. One interviewee preferred to answer the questions in writing while another was interviewed through e-mail correspondence. In the recent past, the Bengali community in the Lower Mainland has lost a few members to old age. To exclude these members who have died would have been to exclude part of the history of Bengali immigrants in BC; therefore, the adult children and the widow of those who have passed were interviewed.

The other criteria for participation in this study were that participants had to be immigrants from India and be 30 years old or over; participants also had to be residents of BC for at least 10 years. The Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society lists 88 members who met these criteria, and 67% of this population took part in this project by agreeing to be interviewed.

Background of Migration

The settlement of Bengali immigrants in British Columbia started in 1960.¹⁹ Bengalis who arrived in the 1960s and made the Lower Mainland their home stated that Dr. Asoke Chaklader, who joined the University of British Columbia as a faculty member in the department of Materials Engineering in 1960, was most likely the first Bengali to settle here. Dr. Chaklader is one of the participants who were interviewed for this article. He has agreed to be identified by name.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Canadian immigration policies were changed from a discriminatory sponsorship-based policy to a policy based on education and occupational skills (Kelley and Trebilcock 2000). This change in Canadian immigration policy raised curiosity among the Bengali diaspora in

¹⁹ For the purposes of this essay, the phrase “Background of Migration” refers to participants’ own accounts of why and how they immigrated to Canada.

Europe and the United States of America (USA). Nine out of fifteen interviewees who migrated to Canada in the 1960s came from Europe or the USA. Obtaining a Canadian immigration visa meant walking into the Canadian Embassy/High Commission and expressing the wish to immigrate to Canada. Not only were these interviewees granted visas within a few days, but they were also offered travel tickets to Canada. The Bengalis who migrated directly from India in the 1960s stated that they were working for multinational companies through which they came into contact with Canadians who encouraged them to come to Canada.

Within the last 50 years, the highest number of Bengalis came to the Lower Mainland in the 1970s (see Figure 7). The reason for the higher number is that the bachelor men who came in the 1960s and early 1970s went to India and got married. Thus, the reason for the higher number of arrivals is mainly the newly wedded brides. It is apparent that in the 1980s and 1990s only a handful of Bengalis came to the Lower Mainland. Those who came included two retired couples and a couple who emigrated from another part of Canada. This lull can be attributed to the recession in the early 1980s. According to a report by the Business Council of British Columbia (2012), compared to Canada the economic growth in BC was slow in the 1980s and 1990s. During the years 2000-2010 there is an increase in the number of Bengalis choosing the Lower Mainland as their home. This preference could be attributed to the boom in information technology and wireless sector companies in British Columbia.

Bengali Immigrants of the 1960s

Fourteen Bengalis from India who migrated to Canada in the 1960s and made BC their home were interviewed for this essay. The widow of a member who had recently passed away talked about her deceased husband's experience. The 1960s group of Bengali immigrants were mostly bachelors with the exception of one bachelorette. Two other female members came as spouses.

The 1960s group can be classified into the following categories:

- A. Bengalis who migrated directly from India and made their first trip abroad
- B. Bengalis who were working/studying in Europe or the USA
- C. Bengalis who had been to Europe, the USA, or Canada as students and had gone back to India but decided to migrate permanently to Canada

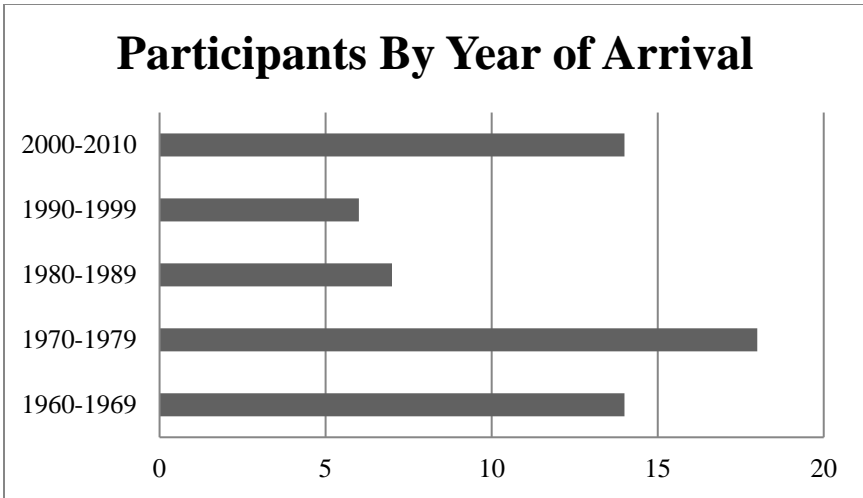


Figure 7: Participants' Year of Arrival in Canada

When asked about the reason for their migration to Canada, participants gave a variety of responses. None in Group A or B thought that they were going to live in Canada permanently. Migrating to Canada was an adventure for them. The following are a few anecdotes from these participants:

I was working for a multinational company and two Canadian consultants were visiting our firm. When they saw my engineering work they said, 'You are way too good for this country, why don't you come to Canada?'.... This is what initiated my wish to come to Canada.

It was a childhood dream of mine to visit abroad. I was working for an engineering firm when two consultants from Canada told me to come to Canada. I asked them, 'Sahib, we don't know the system to go to Canada.' They ripped two pages from a Yellow Pages directory and handed it to me. Those two pages contained the list of firms. I started to type my resume in aerogrammes and mailed it to different firms and that is how I was offered a job, then I applied for immigration.

You see...I had worked on a problem, the results of which were presented to a conference at MIT in 1956, and it was well received. I had no knowledge that my professor had sent a copy of my thesis to Prof. Bragg [Nobel Laureate in Physics], who was the Director of the Royal Institute at that time. He recommended me for

the most prestigious award in England.... The only other Indian to receive this scholarship before me was Dr. H. J. Bhabha. It was the the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 Award.... I had job offers from MIT and Berkley but I was determined to go back to India as my younger sibilings were dependent on me.... I said the same thing to the professor who was insisting for me to join UBC.... Finally I agreed to come for two years.

Bengalis in Group C stated that, after being exposed to Western work ethics and environment, they were not satisfied with what they were doing when they returned to India.

Bengali Immigrants of the 1970s

The Bengali community in the Lower Mainland saw a boom in numbers of Bengalis in the 1970s. This is because many of the bachelors from the 1960s and early 1970s got married and brought their spouses to BC. Sixteen participants belonged to this group, and the son of a recently deceased couple was interviewed about his parents' experience. 1970s arrivals can also be clustered in the same way as the 1960s group, with a little addition to Group A because this group now had about six wives who were sponsored by their husbands. This group also included two men who were sponsored by their siblings. Unlike the 1960s group, where almost all the members thought that they would go back to India after a few years of stay in Canada, only two members from the 1970s group expressed such a wish. Participants' reasons for migration were also articulated in terms of making an informed choice. The men who were sponsored by their siblings stated that they aspired to better lives than what they had in India. The following are few quotes from these participants:

I came to the US to do my PhD. I had no political notion or concerns when I came...I began to see strong anti-war movement going on at that time. People were very much engaged in opposing the United States' war in Vietnam...so, that people could oppose their own country was a great revelation to me...I had never thought that it was possible to oppose your own country. I gradually became interested...I participated in protests...the National Guards were called into Kent State at a student's protest and they shot students...four students were dead...that was shocking! I had two job offers, including one in the States...the violence that was going on and what we saw on TV...I decided I don't want to be here.

I had a very good job in the UK as an engineer...though there was no overt racism or discrimination, I could sense that there was a glass ceiling...I decided to move to Canada.

In 1977, the Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society (LMBCS) was established as the first of its kind. This not-for-profit organization sought to promote Bengali culture within the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

Bengali Immigrants of the 1980s and 1990s

The Bengali community did not grow much in the 1980s and 1990s. Among all the interviewees, only eight came to the Lower Mainland in this period. However, this small group was anything but homogeneous. The migrants from this period can be grouped as follows:

- A. Wives who migrated directly from India and made their first trip abroad
- B. Bengalis who were working/studying in Europe or Canada
- C. Two retired couples from Hong Kong and South Africa who chose beautiful British Columbia to spend the last chapter of their lives²⁰
- D. A single female parent with a child

This was the first cohort where none expressed that they wanted to return after a few years of stay in Canada. The following are three excerpts from participants' reasons for migration:

...From India we came to Nigeria and had a very good job.... One day we thought let us try a new continent...a first world country...we chose Vancouver mainly for its weather.

When I was in grade eight back in 1988, I came to Canada to visit my uncle for two months...that actually inspired me to come to Canada...I was young and I loved this country.

...When I finished my PhD in Computer Science at McGill, job prospects in my field were not that good in India whereas here I had several job offers...I decided to stay in Canada.

²⁰ Both of these retired couples have passed away in the last two years. Their adult children were interviewed instead.

Bengali Immigrants of the 2000s: A Paradigm Shift

With the turn of the century, a paradigm shift took place among the categories of Bengalis who migrated to BC. Fourteen people (nine women and five men) from this time period were interviewed. The new millennium saw the emergence of female immigrants who were highly trained in technical fields. The number of women who merely followed their husbands to this land decreased in this period. The most significant shift took place in the area of reason for migration, such as same-sex marriage. The grouping of the immigrants of the 2000s looks like this:

- a) Couples, with the wives following their husbands
- b) Women who were highly trained in technical fields, and their partners

Each woman in the second group mentioned that her career was given equal importance during the decision-making process to migrate to Canada. A couple of these women found employment in their professional fields sooner than their husbands, which is a shift from the past when highly educated women who had a career in India left their jobs and simply moved to Canada because of their husbands. These women were never able to pursue their careers and were either housewives or underemployed.

Socio-Cultural Adjustment of Bengali Immigrants in BC²¹

Initial settlement. From 1960 to 2010, none of the Bengalis who participated in this study sought any kind of assistance through any government agency to help them settle in Canada. Their support system involved employers and, eventually, with increasing numbers of Bengalis, connections and help from within the community. This help was limited to assistance related to the search for housing, information as to where to shop for food etc., and emotional support. Discussed below are the aspects of these immigrants' lives which constitute the essence of their identity in Canada.

Educational background and employment status. Traditionally, Bengalis aspire to higher education. The first college in India was established in Kolkata, West Bengal, exactly two hundred years ago. Currently, it is known as the Presidency University. True to its heritage, the Bengali community of BC is comprised of highly educated people. The 59 participants of this study present a

²¹ For the purposes of this study, the term "socio-cultural adjustment" will include participants' initial settlement process including employment, connection to homeland, and sense of ethnic as well as Canadian identity.

snapshot of the educational background of the Bengali diaspora. The specific educational and professional level of the 59 participants is illustrated in Figure 8.

It is important to mention that Bengali immigrants received their higher education mainly abroad. Only two out of seventeen PhDs were obtained in India; the rest were received either in the United Kingdom, the USA, or Canada. Similarly, most of participants' Master's degrees were received outside of India. On the other hand, professionals such as engineers, physicians, and a single lawyer received their training solely in India.

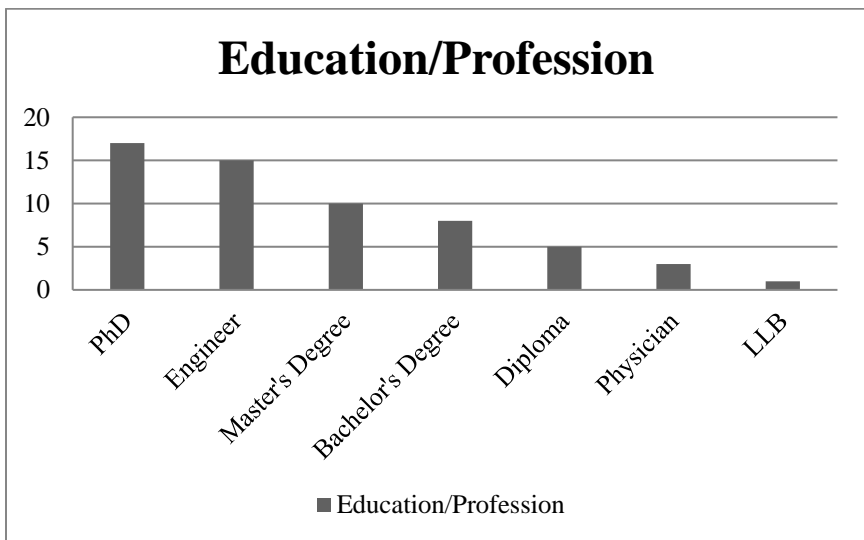


Figure 8: Educational and Professional Status of the Participants

In a recent Canadian study, it was found that Asian immigrants who migrated to Canada with a foreign degree have been marginalized in the labour market as their degrees were not recognized (Zaman, 2012). Figure 9 illustrates the employment status of the Bengali diaspora. Of the participants in this study, 62% stated that they are employed according to their training; this includes participants who received higher degrees outside of India as well as all engineers and physicians who had Indian degrees. Of participants, 25% stated that they are underemployed because their degrees from India were not accepted as equivalent to a Canadian degree; for example, a trained teacher with a Master's degree from India had to

take up a job in the Early Childhood Education field earning significantly less than what a Canadian teacher with an equivalent Master's degree earns. This is in congruence with Zaman's (2012) finding. Unfortunately, among this 25% of Bengali participants, all but two were women, a fact which is also in congruence with previous studies where it was found that foreign-trained immigrant women performed least well when compared with foreign-trained men and Canadian-born women (Zaman, 2006).

While narrating their labour market experience, only two women stated dissatisfaction about the fact that they were underemployed. The rest seemed satisfied with what they do, as they saw their employment as an engagement rather than a career. In all these instances, the husbands were well-employed in their field of training. This may also be reflective of Indian culture, wherein the husband's career is given higher priority, and women, most of who were married to their husbands through arranged marriages, are expected to follow their husband. With wives having a less demanding job and in many cases a part-time job, the husbands relied completely on their wives to run the household and raise the children. They did not have to struggle to find a work-life balance. It is during the weekends that the men involved themselves with their children's activities such as taking them to soccer games etc.



Figure 9: Current Employment Status of the Participants

Connection to homeland. Almost all the participants have maintained a strong connection with their family in India. This connection is maintained through communication and frequent visits to the homeland. However, due to the advancement of technology and creation of the internet, the modes of communication have changed over the years. Bengalis who immigrated between the 1960s and the 1990s mainly communicated through hand-written letters that took more than a week to reach their destination. Telephone calls were rare and required the process of booking the call and waiting for hours for one's turn. From the mid-1990s onward, the direct dialing system became available, followed by e-mails and video conferencing. Whereas Bengalis in the 1960s through 1980s communicated with families in India via two letters a month, the current diaspora now not only talk whenever they wish but are also able to share every bit of their life with family in India through video conferencing. With software applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, they are in constant touch with family and friends in India. It seems that as communication became frequent and based in real time, the wish for immigrants to return to India to be with family decreased. Whether there is any correlation between these two phenomena needs to be researched.

In addition to communicating frequently, all male participants and a few female participants stated that they were also responsible for the wellbeing of their aged parents in India. Their responsibilities were more like supervising the care that their parents received. Sending remittances remains a common cultural practice, but for most of the families it is not need-based. Sending remittances did not have any significant impact on their financial situation.

Linguistic and religious identity. Other than the men and women whose spouses were not Bengalis, all participants said that Bengali is the principle language of communication at home. Several said that they are *Mone-Prane Bangali*.²² More than 50% of participants mentioned that they feel strongly that their children need to know how to speak, read, and write Bengali. Many acknowledged that Vancouver Bangla Vidyalaya²³ has played a key role in

²² *Mone-Prane Bangali* bears the connotation "Bengali by heart and soul." The exact translation would be "Bengali by mind and heart."

²³ Vancouver Bangla Vidyalaya was restarted by Supriya Bhattacharyya in 1990 to teach Bengali to children between the ages of 5-12. It is a free program supported by the LMBCS.

teaching Bengali to their children. English was the second language of all the Bengalis. Very few knew French.

When asked about the role of religion in their lives, all except for four men said that religion played no role in their lives and they did not practice any religious rituals. Some stated that they believed in spirituality but all were comfortable identifying themselves as Hindus. They acknowledged that their participation in religious festivals such as Durga Puja²⁴ is mainly for cultural reasons. Three men stated that Hindu religious philosophy (i.e., Vedanta) played a significant role in their lives, and one declared himself to be agnostic. On the other hand, almost all women acknowledged that they performed some religious rituals on a daily basis, and had a *Thakurer Ason*²⁵ at home. However, all men and women participants unequivocally stated that they respect every religion.

In juxtaposing the responses to the question regarding the role of language versus those regarding the role of religion, it is evident that all participants attributed greater importance to their linguistic identity than their religious identity. They took pride in maintaining, cultivating, and passing this linguistic identity to their offspring. The affiliation with Bengali language went beyond a mode of communication and became a cultural entity, the future of which is uncertain due to the globalization of the English language. One participant stated,

I am extremely concerned that Bengali language is going to disappear, at least from the Indian side, it is quite evident to me at least...what is seen in the popular culture in Bengal these days...I am very certain that most Bengalis will not be able to write all the alphabets.

Thus, overall, these immigrants felt that prioritizing the Bengali language over their religion was more important in the preservation of their Bengali identity abroad.

Embracing Canada, its multicultural policy, and its history. Bengali immigrants in the Lower Mainland made a conscious, well-informed decision to migrate to Canada. None of them were refugees or victims of natural calamities such as famine etc. Each of them had their own personal reasons for migration. This highly educated group had little to no difficulty in finding employment, and could purchase their own property within 1-5 years after their arrival in Canada.

²⁴ Durga Puja is the Bengali festival wherein Bengalis worship the Hindu Goddess Durga.

²⁵ *Thakurer Ason* refers to a small shrine consisting of small pictures, sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses, and other religious relics. This is the place at home where people pray.

Therefore, tangible connections to this land were made very easily. However, when asked about their involvement with their local communities, most Bengalis said that they tend to keep their association limited to their professional and Bengali social circles. Among the women who participated, nine out of 26 said that they were involved with local community organizations as volunteers. Only one male participant had an unique perspective on his involvement with a focus group which was not a cultural group, saying,

I know that India has a lot of problems and Bengal has a lot of problems but I also know that it is hypocritical of me to sit here and pass judgment...since this is my adopted country and I have been a Canadian for a long time now, it is right for me to get involved in doing what is right for this country...I take my citizenship seriously.

It is also obvious that a highly qualified group such as this represents a pool of highly analytical minds. Though everyone supported Canada's multicultural policies as a theory, they all acknowledged that this theory has yet to be fully realized. None recorded suffering overt racism or discrimination, but they were aware that it existed in Canada. One participant articulated it thusly: "Multiculturalism is a mechanism for discrimination...all human beings should be treated equally...that is a basic humane thing to do.... Government has nothing to do with my culture." Concern regarding the Indigenous people of Canada was genuine, though the level of knowledge about the history of Canadian First Nations people varied among the participants. Some had educated themselves about this history prior to leaving India, and some were not aware of it until recently. One participant wondered why First Nations languages are not taught in the public schools of Canada the way Maori language is taught and promoted in New Zealand. In general, all agreed that raising public awareness through education is the key to lifting the curtain of ignorance that exists related to First Nations history. Bengalis are known for having prolonged discussion sessions on any topic, and the topic of Canadian politics and history was no exception. Through these discussions, their intellectual connection to this land was revealed, but for every participant the emotional connection to this land was solidified through their children, for whom Canada is home. Most from the 1960s cohort have become octogenarians, and they are satisfied with their quality of life and do not experience social isolation. The occasional pull towards their homeland is overshadowed by the pull of their children and grandchildren who are here. They also realize that the country and the family they left years ago are not the same. I will end this section with two comments that are particularly poignant. One

participant said, “Once my parents and other relatives started to die one by one of old age...the space that I knew as my home was no more.” Another participant, who has been living in Canada for over fifty years, made a follow-up call just to say, “Though I do not want to return back to India to live there anymore, it is my wish that after my death and cremation, my ashes be immersed in the river Mahananda”; this is a river that runs through the city of this participant’s childhood.

Conclusion

The oral history of the Bengali immigrants of BC that was collected for this paper constitutes a treasure trove from which information was gleaned to present the background of their migration and socio-cultural adjustment to their new land. The participants spanned a fifty-year history of immigration, and their oral narratives captured the essence of a community that values higher education and multiculturalism, and identifies themselves more with their language than their religion. At the same time, Bengalis from India have blended themselves into the mosaic of Canadian society at large. Their smooth transition from being members of a visible minority group to being members of the greater community was possible partly due to their high level of educational and professional qualifications, and partly because of the multicultural nature of Canadian society. Participants never saw themselves as being on the receiving end of a charitable country’s generosity; rather, they established themselves as contributing members of Canadian society. In the grand scheme of things, the oral history of these 59 people may not seem significant, but it is the story of the trailblazers of the small but distinct community of Bengali-Canadians in British Columbia.

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