

## Note from the Editor

### Bangladesh in New York

Very recently, thanks to the You Tube, I had an opportunity to listen to a debate organized by a literary society in Kolkata on a rather pointless motion which went something like this, “Kolkata is the Past of Bengali Culture while Dhaka is its Future”. I was not sure what they were actually debating about since neither culture nor the notion of the past and future were clearly defined, although it appeared that they were debating about the “richness” of culture of West Bengal as opposed to the culture of East Bengal, which may have some meaning in literature but no one either from the organizers or the six members of the two contending teams offered any definition of what that richness includes. The motion sounded as if the whole of Bengali culture began in Kolkata and its future lies in Dhaka. Two of the debaters who defended the motion were from Bangladesh, the others were from Kolkata’s cultural scene: authors, artists, literary critiques etc. But what all of them forgot was the fact that Dhaka was already about one thousand years in the past (at least from 7<sup>th</sup> century on ward) before Kolkata even became a trading post for the East India Company. This Dhaka of the past, situated in an around the present day city like in Sonar Gaon or Bikrampur, being centrally located and accessible by huge rivers connecting it directly to the Bay of Bengal, was the commercial and the industrial heart, which in the pre-British days generated over 12% of world GDP or half of the total GDP of South Asia, and often served as the political capital of the whole of Bengal, therefore, became the focal point not only of international trade but also of the culture of the region and, of course, of the Bangla language. Indeed, Bangla language and literature saw much of its growth and development during the past millennium mostly under the patronage of the Muslim rulers of Bengal residing in and around Dhaka. So the past of the Bangla language, art, literature and the culture in general does not originate in Kolkata. If anything, it was based in Dhaka.

The notion of the “past” of Bengali culture being located in Kolkata, therefore, is hugely misplaced. However, what the debaters were largely referring to was the period when the British ruled India from Kolkata and gave rise to a group of English educated Bengali people, almost totally Hindu, who wholeheartedly collaborated with the Brits in exploiting the country, particularly East Bengal. These English educated people, encouraged by Western culture, gave rise to a new brand of “high caste” Hindu culture in Kolkata primarily during the early 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dominated the arts, music, language, literature and drama, indeed the whole cultural scene of Bengal. This culture of Kolkata originating among the upper caste Hindu traders, government servants and landlords, including the absentee landlords who resided in Kolkata but literally owned much of the then East Bengal, was known to the Brits as “Babu Culture” (Babu

being a derogatory term to the Brits) and to the Babu's themselves as the "Bhadralok Culture", Bhadrlok, meaning refined and genteel as opposed to the rustic and vulgar culture of the common folk, particularly of the people of East Bengal, including that of Dhaka. Hence, prose, poetry, drama and the arts, and Bangla language fully dominated by Sanskrit came to be heralded as the "High Culture" of the Bhadrlok, while the native culture; folk-lore, folk art, literature, music and drama, etc. got demoted as the culture of the lowly peasants of East Bengal and, therefore, Dhaka.

Indeed, this Kolkata culture was seen in sharp contrast to the culture of Dhaka, and East Bengal, infused with Arabic, Persian and Urdu, basically Islamic, elements in the language and culture in general. A derogatory term "Bangal" was coined to identify the people of East Bengal and their culture while "Chasha", another derogatory term, was used to refer to the "lowly" peasants of this eastern region by the people of Kolkata. This notion of inferior "Bangal" is so pervasive in Kolkata culture that even in 1992 when I visited Kolkata a street vendor shouted out the word "Bangal" behind me as I walked passed his store. I was not speaking in any particular Bangla accent or interacting with anyone to be easily recognised but just my demeanour, the end result of my "Dhaka culture", differentiated me from the Kolkata crowd to the extent that even a street vendor recognised me as coming from East Bengal<sup>1</sup>. Seventy years of separation of the two Bengals has not made much of a dent in the level of that prejudice!

And as Kolkata prospered in economy, commerce and industry, along with being the capital of British India, Dhaka was robbed of its primacy and fell from a city of one million in the pre-British days to a city of as little as thirty thousand people, losing not only its grandeur but also its dominant position in the culture of the region. Positioned as the capital of British India, Kolkata dominated the Bengali culture as well as acted as the cultural capital of India in general. But things began to change after the partitions of Bengal, first in 1905 and then in 1947.

After the first partition in 1905 in which West Bengal comprising of the Hindu majority districts of Bengal (Bihar and parts of Orissa) with Kolkata at its centre was separated from and the Muslim majority eastern districts of East Bengal plus Assam with Dhaka as its capital thereby returning some of the previous prominence to the ancient city. There was a hue and cry against this partition largely from among the absentee landlords residing in Kolkata, including RabindrabathTagore, the "crowning glory" of the Kolkata culture, who personally owned huge estates in East Bengal, and the Bhadrlok in general. The Brits finally conceded and reunited Bengal in 1911 but they were a bit too clever for the Bhadrlok of Kolkata and they dealt a fatal blow to Kolkata by shifting the capital of the British India to Delhi depriving the "Babus" of Kolkata the pre-eminence they had over the rest of India.

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<sup>1</sup> I have written more on this in the previous issue ("Note from the Editor" in *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 16 Number 1).

At the same time the Brits also began to offer some concessions to the Muslims in keeping with their divide and rule policy and opened the University of Dhaka thus allowing the “Bangals” to get some “education” and exposure to Western learning. Dhaka immediately thereafter, in December 1906, provided the setting for the establishment of the Muslim League, which within the next forty years successfully led movements for the creation of Pakistan, a state for the Muslims in India in 1947. But that was not enough or satisfying, and in the next twenty-five years Dhaka created not only a whole new nation based on its own language and culture but the independent state of Bangladesh as well, not too bad for the “Bangals” frowned upon by the Kolkata Culture.

The Second Partition in 1947 that divided Bengal into East Pakistan with Dhaka as its capital and West Bengal with Kolkata as its capital and made them parts of two new countries of south Asia, Pakistan and India, effectively sealed the fate of Kolkata as being the centre of anything. Kolkata from being the capital of British Raj turned into the provincial capital of a rather small and increasingly an impoverished state, one among many other larger and more prosperous states of India. Flight of commerce and industry followed in its wake and whatever remained got owned by investors from the other states, mostly from the west of India. The culture got intertwined with the cultures of the rest of the Indian states, and due to the onslaught of Hindi language and the Bollywood movies, Kolkata culture and even the Bangla language today can barely breathe freely. I remember in many of my visits to the city I found that the language of the streets had effectively changed to Hindi, hardly any shopkeeper, or service personnel in government and other offices addressed me in Bengali, they simply addressed me in Hindi. *When language is gone, culture is gone too.* Bangla as a language in Kolkata may still reside in the university campuses and its culture in Shantiniketan but by and large the culture it supports is “gone” out of circulation. At any cultural or social gathering Hindi is freely mixed with Bangla and not owning Hindi tantamount to being “non-Indian”!

Today Kolkata is not even the dominant city in India, in spite of the much talked about recent economic growth, largely fuelled by millions of Bangladeshi tourists spending billions on medical treatments and bridal shopping. It is difficult for Kolkata culture to make it up to Delhi, let alone the world. Education, arts, literature, music, drama etc. all have a better or “higher” counterpart in other parts of India. So the high culture of Kolkata or its “glorious past” was confined to about a century between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries during the British rule and has lost its authority long since even in India. Bengali is just one among many of the state languages of India and barely surviving from the encroachment of languages from the other parts of India and the same is true of Kolkata based Bengali culture. The high culture of Kolkata was just a flicker on a larger stage of the whole of Bengal with thousands of years of its history.

While on the other hand, Dhaka by the 1947 partition again became a provincial capital and then after 1971 the capital of a sovereign state and launched its independent path to cultural revival. Today, Dhaka is not only the centre of commerce, industry and politics but is also the cultural capital of a “country” and represents the same on a world stage. The education of the “Bangals” which began in earnest with the

setting up of the University of Dhaka has today flourished, through nearly 150 universities, in all sciences and arts, technology, medicine and commerce and, if not greater, it is definitely on equal terms with Kolkata. The partition has also set free its long suppressed culture and began to redefine itself in a new setting and soon sought to project itself to the rest of the world in ways that cannot even be dreamt of by the present day Kolkata culture. Bengali, the vehicle of this culture, is today the proud language of a country, which was fought for with blood while Dhaka culture transformed that bleeding into a fight for all mother languages of the world and February 21, the day of bloodshed, got recognised internationally as “Mother Language Day”. That language, free of Kolkata culture, continues to incorporate local variations of dialects and accents, no longer encumbered by Sanskritization it freely incorporates words and definitions from other languages including retaining the previous influences of Arabic, Persian and Urdu. One speaker who defended Kolkata Culture in the debate termed this trend as detestable while he himself was open to the incorporation of Hindi into Kolkata’s Bengali forgetting completely that Hindi is just a variant of Urdu, with the recent incorporation of more Sanskrit words in place of Persian and Arabic ones and written in Devanagiri script instead of Arabic script.

A number of such other “trivial” issues were raised in the debate mostly misplaced or misinformed but in any case I cited this debate not to add to it or even to flame further debates. My primary objective is to show how the Bangladesh of today, the “Bangals” of the British Raj or the rustic “Chashas”, have fared when it came to confront other cultures. Indeed, the strength or tenacity of a culture can be judged best when it confronts other societies and cultures. So let’s look at the present of both Kolkata and Dhaka “cultures” before we predict their future. Kolkata culture today is crumbling, getting drowned, in the face of competition from others within its own doors, let alone the whole country or even the world. While the Dhaka, or the Bangladeshi, culture against all odds, including also the onslaught of Hindi and Bollywood culture through the social and mass media, is flourishing all over the world. For one thing, even the Kolkata literary society today thinks that it is appropriate to compare the cultures of the “two” Bengals!

Remember the “China Town” all over the world. It is the strength or the tenacity of thousands of years of Chinese culture because of which wherever the Chinese have gone they have built for themselves a niche, where Chinese culture announces itself proudly. Be it in Europe, USA, Canada or even in Kolkata there is a China Town. Now think of the people of Kolkata or of West Bengal, they have been migrating to USA and Canada for over seventy years, if not more, but have left little or no mark anywhere. They may congregate here and there as an ethnic group on social and religious occasions but identify themselves as “Indians”, often shunning the Bengalis from Bangladesh as aliens amidst them even if invited. When they happen to be under one roof, say in a concert of South Asian origin, you are very likely to find the “two” Bengals forming two distinct crowds, separated as far away from each other as possible, eyeing each other suspiciously, fearful that others (other Indians) might treat them as one group. The only impressive contribution of Kolkata culture I came across in the USA was when in the late 1970s a senior library official of Indian origin at the Syracuse University launched a half an hour long radio programme of Tagore songs

on the university's own radio channel on Sunday mornings. The library official was, unfortunately, a Sikh gentleman from the Punjab in love with Tagore and *not* a Bengali "Bhadralok" from Kolkata!

Now compare the Bangladeshis who began to migrate to the USA and Canada only during the past three decades in any major numbers. And look at the neighbourhoods where they have set roots. Each is a "Little Dhaka" or a "Mini Bangladesh", complete with Bangla language announcing its presence through the billboards on shops and restaurants and even on street corners. The Bangladeshi flag is seen fluttering beside the flags of the USA or Canada. The New York City government recognizes Bangla as one of its state languages and will provide a translator in any government dealings if needed by a Bangladeshi. This was not achieved by Kolkata culture, it was the "Bangal" culture, the "Chashas", from the "backward" districts of East Bengal who cannot speak Bangla with the Kolkata "purity" yet proudly carried their distinctive district accent of Noakhali, Barisal or Sylhet to New York and Toronto and celebrates 21<sup>st</sup> February as *Shaheed Dibash* there. Even in the 1990s the Bangladeshis in New York had their own TV channel and I counted over six Bangla newspapers published from New York then. The shops and restaurants cater for all kinds of goods, including fresh produce and fishes, often imported directly from Bangladesh. So that the "present" of Bengali culture is definitely with Dhaka, or Bangladesh, but that of Kolkata failed to make such a mark abroad while currently it is fading and getting absorbed into the larger Indian culture, I feel that speaks tonnes for the future of the "two cultures" as well.

Hence, let's get to the topic proper, that of the "Bangladesh in New York". Being one of the last groups to reach the shores of the USA, the Bangladeshis have begun making their presence felt in this migrant society in a big way. Though some individuals migrated to the USA during the Pakistan period, while some are said to have jumped ship even during the British times, as early as 1887<sup>1</sup>, a sizable movement of Bangladeshis began after the independence in the 1970s. The first of these were groups of graduate students, including myself in 1977 (first to Canada in 1976), going for higher studies to the universities all over the USA, initiating a process of brain drain that has cost Bangladesh very dearly (but, that's another story). Most ended up as professors or in high paid jobs outside the university. The whole of my batch of pharmacy graduates (22 out of 23, if I remember correctly) from the University of Dhaka, migrated to the USA in 1973<sup>2</sup>. The day I flew out of Bangladesh in September of 1976, 41 other junior university teachers also accompanied me for their graduate studies abroad on the only available weekly flight. I returned to Bangladesh in 1982 immediately after receiving my PhD degree while, with the exception of one other, everyone else from that flight remained in the USA (and Canada).

Other professionals like doctors and engineers started to migrate to the USA by the 1980s, mostly on visitor visa, some even moved out on "farm workers" visa. Many over-stayed their welcome on "visitor" or "student" visa, became "illegal" aliens" and at different stages got naturalized. But the number did not reach any

<sup>1</sup><https://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/Bangladeshi-Americans.html>

<sup>2</sup> In 1973, 154 Bangladeshi immigrants arrived in the United States; 147 in 1974; 404 in 1975, and 590 in 1976.

Read more: <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/Bangladeshi-Americans.html#ixzz5a71BqKoP>

noticeable proportion until the Diversification Visa (DV lottery) programme was extended to Bangladesh by the 1990s. The DV lottery, for the first time allowed people of other socioeconomic groups, including, initially, even some uneducated working class ones, to legally migrate and they began to make a ripple right away. One of the very first persons to receive a visa under DV lottery was a street hawker selling chicken (“murgiwalla”) in Dhaka. When a news reporter asked him what he would do going to such an advanced country without any education or skills, undaunted he promptly replied, “Why? I shall vend chicken there too<sup>1</sup>.” That’s the spirit and energy that these later groups of “uneducated” or less educated people from around the 1990s brought to America and succeeded in creating a niche for themselves. They were ready to start at the bottom, which was in sharp contrast to the earlier group of highly educated professionals, spread all over the US campuses and suburbs, practically in personal isolations, who never achieved any visibility but got absorbed in the larger US society and culture.

Today, according to Pew Research Center<sup>2</sup>, there are close to 200,000 Bangladeshis in the USA, other estimates put it to over half a million, perhaps including the illegal ones. The government sources list the Bangladeshi migrants as the fastest growing ethnic community in the USA, from 1990-2000 it was growing at 471% and more than two thirds of the Bangladeshis arrived during this period. As happened with other migrants to the USA, they mostly set root in New York City and today close 75% of them live in the city. Others live primarily in New Jersey, Florida, Michigan, Texas and California states, though many can be found sprinkled over in every other state of the Union. Obviously, it is in New York where they have made the greatest impact, living as a community, contributing to the economy, society and the state and standing out as a cultural entity.

It is also in New York where I have been observing the Bangladeshis grow over the last forty years. During my graduate days in late 1970s at Syracuse University in central New York, we were about 15 Bangladeshi graduate students, some of us with spouse and children. I often visited New York City but would hardly ever meet other Bangladeshis, though some scores of them were definitely living there at the time. I knew only one Bangladeshi family in the City and once in a while met a few of their Bangladeshi acquaintances, mostly students visiting from other states. Since then, fortunately for me, because of my academic programmes and later my daughter and son studying at Columbia University (they both came back to Bangladesh after completing their programmes and I am proud of that), I have been visiting the city on and off for the last forty years, as a result have been able to observe the ebb and flow of the fortunes of this community.

In the sociological literature migration is explained largely in terms of the “Pull” and the “Push” factors, pull being the attraction at the destination and the push being the hardships at the origin. But I have found the two terms severely limited in explaining the “realities” of migration. For instance, the pull of the rich and

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<sup>1</sup> Narrated by a friend. The incident was reported in a local newspaper then.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/fact-sheet/asian-americans-bangladeshis-in-the-u-s/>

advanced cultures, societies, are always there for most people of the poor countries, yet not everyone migrates. While, on the other hand, often the push factors can be as desperate as a war or famine yet, most cannot migrate. To “pack up” and go to face the uncertainties at the destination requires a whole lot of other factors, including at the minimum, the cost and the sufferings of the journey itself, as are being played out on the Mediterranean and the Sahara on a daily basis these days, and even a workable community network or support base at the destination. Similarly, “setting root” at the destination is dependent on a whole other set of factors, beside the pull, including the support of the host population, politics, economy and the cultural norms at the destination. The fate of the Syrian migrants to Europe during the last couple of years is the most recent case to note. Even the “Pull” factors can hide serious “Push” factors at the destination itself and turn setting root into a nightmare. So, some years ago I proposed the “pack-up” and “setting-root” as two other factors to better explain migration. All four of these factors can be used to better understand the migration of Bangladeshi population to the USA.

For the early migrants, the graduate students of the seventies, the professionals of the eighties, and later for many a well to do families, it was purely the “pull” factor of a better living that worked to lure them to leave the country. This is particularly true of many families today living in large cities like Toronto or LA with the children, while the husband earns and supports them from Bangladesh. There was nothing drastically wrong for most of these people in Bangladesh to “push” them to leave, other than it being a “dusty-nasty” place for their liking. More than the push, they had the means to leave, the right pack-up factors, education and skill for the professionals and money for the later families of bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians (though a few of them, indeed, were “pushed”, had to leave the country because of opposing political views).

But, in some cases, the opposite was true. The “push” was at the destination. When I reached Canada with dozens of other graduate students in 1976, the population there was rather very hostile to the migrants, to the extent of physically beating up the “*Pakis*”, people originating from South Asia, not being uncommon. Due to constant fear of being harassed, particularly by the local youths, it was risky to even move around in the city of Hamilton, where I resided and instead of “setting-root”, within a couple of weeks I decided to move out of Canada, though it took till the end of the academic year to move to the USA. A friend, simply failed to “adjust” and returned to Bangladesh within the month. The situation there, fortunately, improved later and unlike me, the rest of the students decided to stick it out and finally many applied for and received Canadian citizenship.

During my earlier short visits to the USA, after 1982, I was living mostly among the university graduates from the seventies and eighties and saw them struggle through student life but finally end up in well paid jobs as professors, doctors, and engineers etc., living off-campus or a sub-urban middle class life, some trying vainly to remain a Bangladeshi but meeting with unforeseen consequences. Setting roots was comparatively easy for them because of their education and skill but not free of complications. While most had Bangladeshi spouse, a few of them married into Spanish, Black or West Indian and some into Indian

and Pakistani families, facing various constraints in their family lives, many such marriages ending in divorces. The ones with Bangladeshi families were largely at odds with their children who were, often forced by the circumstances, trying to blend in with the “Western” culture. The lovely daughter of a dear friend of mine being so oppressed by the parents to carry on with the Bangladeshi culture became a total introvert while another friend’s daughter revolted at one point in time and left home never to get back to the family. Most, however, got their children through the best possible schools, allowing them certain amount of freedom, and to a good start to their lives as well.

Not until my visit in 1996 as a Fulbright Research Scholar, I had much contact with the “others”, the DV holders and many illegal aliens. The number of Bangladeshis had swelled by then and their presence was felt in places like Jackson Heights, Jamaica and Astoria in New York City, often identified as “Mini” Bangladesh” or “Little Dhaka”. They were already running offices and shops, even a TV channel, Bangla book shop and no less than six Bangla newspapers to cater to the Bangladeshi population. But the lives of these people were in sharp contrast to the earlier highly educated and well off Bangladeshi migrants, who had little or no contact with them, even looked down upon these later ones. Though there was the ever present “push” factor, it was again the opportunity, the “pack-up” factor, like winning the DV lottery or receiving the visitor or student visa and not just the “pull” of a well-set and comfortable life that got them to the USA and for some to accept the precarious “illegal alien” status and in most cases, even for graduates and Masters, to start at the lowest economic level. So the “setting-root” was a much harder process for everyone in this category.

As is true of the New York’s economy, these latest arrivals, with little education or skills and often being illegal, were at the lowest rung of the economic ladder, the cab drivers, busboys, house help and even janitors and into other low paid jobs often working three or four jobs at a time, up to 16 or 18 hours a day. In 1996 I met a busboy, hardly in his twenties, from a well-to-do family in Bangladesh, who had just landed in New York the week before, promptly threw away his passport stamped with “student visa” and became an “illegal immigrant”, through an “uncle” ended up in Cooney Island, sharing a bedroom with two other illegal Bangladeshis, finally got this job at an Indian restaurant only that morning. He could hardly speak any English and upon learning my nationality he began sobbing in front of me as his rosy dreams had already shattered by learning the plight of his roomies. But few in his position ever thought of returning and tried to fight it out till the end (to set-root). I hope he did too.

The vast majority of these later migrants, primarily the DV lottery winners, were from lower classes in Bangladesh, with little or no education or any specific skill to sell. To be sure, there were also many others who were from better economic and educational background but because of their “illegal” status were not eligible for better jobs and had to start at the lowest step. I met a few of them with Master’s degree who also started as busboys, or delivering pizza and taking up taxi driving. On numerous occasions in recent years when I took a taxi, almost every time I ended up with a Bangladeshi cabbie and got to talk to them,

some of whom were in their sixties, been in the USA for two decades or more, but did not change the job largely because it pays quite well, and they do work real hard, often 16 to 18 hours till early morning. They now had their own house and some even had their children studying in top universities or were getting into well paid jobs.

Taxi driving in New York is typically a migrants' job and is handed down from one migrant community to another. In most cases the Bangladeshi drivers inherited their posts from Indian and Pakistani drivers and today half of the "medallions" or taxi driving licences of New York City belong to the Bangladeshi cabdrivers. On an Eid day in 2017, when I happened to be in New York, the city suffered a tremendous shortage of taxi, simply because the Bangladeshi drivers, en masse, decided to observe the religious holiday. The New York Times felt compelled to write a few columns explaining the traffic problems caused by the absence of the Bangladeshi cabdrivers.

This visibility of Bangladesh is not merely due to New York's dependence on taxis. Many Bangladeshis with little or no other skills to move up the ladder soon got to open up shops, petrol pumps, convenience stores and street vending carts with the money they could save or bring from home selling their property. And wherever they opened a shop, they put up a sign in Bangla and Bangla language invaded America. I wrote in an earlier Note that during my first visit to the China Town in New York City in the late 1970s, I was amazed to see shop and street signs in Chinese and wondered if it would be possible for Bangla language to acquire the same position someday. Well, there you have it, in New York, Toronto, Buffalo cities, in New Jersey, Michigan, Florida or Texas states, (as also in the cities in UK) Bangla announces itself proudly, not the Kolkata Bangla, it is pure Dhaka, or Bangladeshi Bangla. So you will find a Kawran Bazar, Mannan Grocery, Star Kabab, or Sagar Chinese Restaurant beside Fatema Pharmacy, Jamuna Money Changer or Dr. Ali's chamber, all written in bold Bangla fonts, including some in neon signs.

By now a sustainable community support or network base has developed to make setting roots easier for the fresh migrants. And, as happens with other migrant communities, Bangladeshi migrants, these later ones, tend to congregate in the same neighbourhoods as well, like in Jamaica, Jackson Heights, Astoria etc. Most live in rented apartments often within the same complex, though, increasingly, as they move up the economic ladder, some are buying houses in the suburbs and moving out. A few Bangladeshi real-estate companies have also sprung up catering to the needs of these migrants. Besides shops, groceries, offering all kinds of vegetables and fishes, often better than what you can get in Dhaka bazars, restaurants, doctors, pathology, travel agencies, financial institutions, schools, mosques, haircutting saloons and even mortuary are all found within such neighbourhoods. This is in such a sharp contrast to my 1970s living, when even to buy a few spices I had to depend on the Chinese shops, the Indians were then just setting up shops in some places. But a fresh Bangladeshi migrant today will not even feel that she is in a foreign land, to the extent that living in Jamaica, or Jackson Heights one can get by, as does the seventy year old

mother of one of my students, without knowing even a single word of English, Bangla is good enough to live in “America”!

Last summer (of 2018), I had a rare opportunity to live among these pioneers and see how they suffered and fought, as all pioneers do, to get to where they are today. Our host couple, friends of my wife, both left well paid jobs in Bangladesh and migrated in the late 1980s. I never got to ask the sensitive question of how they got to become citizens of the USA, I assume that like most other Bangladeshis at about this time they too may have passed through a period of “illegal alien” situation since the wife, Fatema Kamal<sup>1</sup>, was on a training program through a Bangladeshi scholarship and the husband, Kamal Ahmed, tagged along on a spouse visa. Fatema at some point took up a training programme on nursing while Kamal opened a small shop with all their savings that they could take from home, selling knick knacks in Manhattan, living in a small dilapidated rented apartment in Jamaica. Today, the wife is a senior nurse and in hospital administration while the husband owns a large business establishment importing goods from China, employing half a dozen workers, live in a huge one acre Long Island mansion. The Manhattan shop is still there though. Their daughter is a specialist doctor and married to another specialist doctor of Bangladeshi origin and the son just graduated from a business school and is married to a young lawyer of Bangladeshi origin. The children have left the nest and the couple are alone again in a large house. At some point the couple sponsored their parents, who in turn sponsored their other children and as of last summer, they are now a family of 50 plus a set of twins just born to the daughter. Not bad for a migrant couple in 30 years! The last to reach the US is Fatema’s eldest brother with four of his sons living in a ramshackle one bedroom apartment in Jamaica just entering the battle to meet ends but with examples of success within the family, full of dreams.

We arrived just before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations and along with our hosts were invited to a day-long party in a park by the bay north of Jamaica. There we found a number of Bangladeshi families with parents, children and even grand children in festive dress and mood. Some were wearing shorts or shirts imitating the US flag, preparing a lunch of hotdogs, hamburgers and stakes. A few of them were throwing around the American “football” while some children were playing baseball. How American can you get! These Bangladeshis, particularly the children, had no illusions about their nationality, they are all Americans. All around the park there were dozens of such groups, many of other nationalities in origin, but were all relishing their American-ness.

Kazi Arif, a young man in his forties, I met at the park, invited us to the house warming party he had organized. As it happened, the house, a newly built one in a newly opened up high-end residential area, was in a far end of New Jersey and took a couple of hours to reach. There I got to meet his mother in her late sixties who had just arrived in the USA under his sponsorship. I had already met his wife Mina and their

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<sup>1</sup> All names are fictitious ones

two lovely daughters earlier at the park. Arif was preparing for his university admission test in Bangladesh in 1993 when he won the DV lottery. He was only 19 at the time and his middle class family lacking in fund was somewhat reluctant to let him go off all alone. Fortunately for him a distant cousin also won the lottery and the two set off for the USA, the families having to sell part of their property to fund them. On reaching the US, Arif moved from odd job to odd job, working ten to twelve hours but kept to his promise of university education and started to take courses in computer and business, finally graduating after ten hard years he immediately got a well-paid job in a reputed IT firm. He is now a success story by any standard.

I met a few other migrants in their 30s to 60s in various stages of economic success including a couple of them still driving taxis but not all is rosy in their lives. The daily hardships of making ends meet, get the children to the school and back, put dinner on the table comes at tremendous price and working two or three jobs till early morning and then setting aside a few bucks for the future seem to be the key to the treasure trove they are dreaming off. I often keep asking myself whether they could have put themselves through the same hardship in Bangladesh. But here in Bangladesh, perhaps, none of them would have worked that hard<sup>1</sup> or started at such low-level jobs, nor are there so many alternative jobs available. More importantly, here the game is stacked against them, there are very few legal ways of getting ahead, definitely not as quickly or as surely as they will in the USA, often well within one generation and be able to enjoy the retirement as well. Some obviously do make it big here in Bangladesh too as I look around, but I am yet to find out how, in what legal ways, that is. Many, therefore, fearing a dead end, begin looking for alternatives even before they pass high school and are in constant pursuit of ways of getting out of this country. The news of young Bangladeshis among the dead on the Mediterranean or arrested at the European borders is, hence, a stark reminder of the failure of the legal ways to succeed.

However, the current story of these migrants in New York is one of the other two generations. Children from prams to driving racing cars abound in the Bangladeshi migrant families. Though the numbers of children per family is much lower than what is the norm for a migrant family, mostly restricted to two to three children at best, they all are getting the best possible education their parents can afford, and most are the pride of the community as they excel in their class, school and often in the whole State. Like Fatema's children, they are graduating and entering the job market at the high ends. Doctors, engineers, IT, law and business are the most competitive and highest paid jobs and have drawn these children in their hordes. Though, perhaps, starting at a lower level with fewer advantages than the earlier educated professional families' children, these ones are never too far behind and are competing on equal footing with the children of the various other successful migrant communities like the Indians and the Chinese. Though some are also doing part-time odd jobs to help out the family few, if any, will be stuck at the economic level of their parents. Very likely they will leave the nest with much better paid jobs and move into the suburbia, as Fatema's children have done.

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<sup>1</sup> Though many, many other unfortunate ones here actually do, even more, but we, from our middleclass position do not "see" them.

The other interesting generation is of the geriatrics. Most of the Bangladeshi migrants since around 2010 have become eligible to sponsor other family members and they have brought in their parents, who may later sponsor their other children. It is easier this way than sponsoring siblings directly. Most such parents are retired from whatever they were doing in Bangladesh and are doing practically nothing in the USA other than, perhaps, babysitting their grandchildren while the children go out to earn a living. However, a few physically able ones may be seen doing some odd job. In my forty years of visiting the USA I never saw so many gray-haired people from Bangladesh as during the summer of 2018. I often found whole dozens of them sitting around in the small street corner parks in their pyjamas or “lungi” dozing for hours or, to break the boredom, getting into loud chattering criticising politics, economy and society in Bangladesh. Many are also to be found at the local mosques and repeating the same Bangladesh bashing as they leave the place of worship and head back to, guess where, the park.

With the parents near them and the children all set for a brighter future, the life of most of the migrant Bangladeshi families seem to be “made”. Though some are still driving taxis, in most cases they have moved up from the lowest rung of the economy. They are no longer busboys or janitors these have now been inherited by the newly coming Nepalese migrants who are now working in the shops and restaurants owned by the Bangladeshi migrants. Many Bangladeshis find secure jobs in the state and federal governments and a number of them have enrolled in the police and even the military. While the earlier educated ones started high up at the professional level, these lower class and later migrants are ascending the ladder too, step by step, slowly but surely, and are eventually likely to reach the same heights, the hard way.

Nonetheless, many migrants have undeniably succeeded far beyond what they could have dreamt of in Bangladesh and as they move up the economic ladder they also move out of the crowded lanes of Jackson Heights and the dilapidated apartments in Jamaica and on to the middle to upper class suburban life, definitely the children are getting there, faster. Soon, perhaps in another 20 years, unless there is continuous replenishment of lower class or illegal migrants, they will also relinquish the “medallions”, the shops and restaurants to the Nepalese or some other fresh community of migrants to New York City. The Bangla billboards and store names will also get replaced by some other language or along with the Bangladeshi community will get dispersed, as they have already started moving out of New York, to cities like Buffalo, Detroit and Huston and into the suburbia all over the USA. The community too will get absorbed by the larger American society and like the earlier professional groups, largely into oblivion. But some of their children and grandchildren will make names for themselves, become scientists, doctors, or millionaire businessmen while a few will run for the Congress, even the Presidency someday.

**Nazrul Islam**