

Note from the Editor

While working on this issue of the journal I visited the USA for a few weeks to meet friends and family members. I was visiting the country after about 5 years and stayed mostly in New York City and in Philadelphia but thanks to the media got a vivid picture of the fracture of the country during this presidential election year. I noted with some concerns, along with the rest of the world, how sharply the nation was divided. I lived in the USA for five years during my graduate studies forty years ago and visited the country many a times thereafter but never before felt the tension that the electioneering had created. The Republicans, far more than the Democrats, came out with sharpened claws in vicious attacks on the Democratic government of Barak Obama and far more scathing assault on the Democratic presidential candidate Secretary Hillary Clinton. Democrats, though somewhat subdued, were not very far behind but none could outdo the Republican candidate Mr. Donald Trump. Name calling was the mildest form; character assassination, using obscenities and even resorting to violence, appeared to be the norm.

Democratic elections everywhere seem to bring out the worst of the personalities and of the culture itself, including in Bangladesh. But for me this picture does not go well with the claimants to the “greatest democracy” in the world. The whole country down to the Joes on the street are trying to shout down the opposite party supporters almost in the same manner as they see being played out on the television screen by the candidates themselves. What is even more frustrating is to see that there are millions of individuals, including many “leaders” of both parties and of the media coming out in defense of “their” candidate no matter what absurdity is churned out by the candidates. How can anyone defend a candidate who caricatures a disabled person or calls a whole nation of people “terrorists” is beyond my comprehension. And to think that such a candidate may one day claim to be the leader of the free-world sends shivers up my spines. So, like the rest of the world, I too keep fearing the worst outcome of this format of democracy.

However, that is only the minor aspect of my experience this time around. The other, that of the life and work of the Bangladeshi's in the USA, is a heartwarming tale. When I first went to the USA in the middle of the 1970s there were few Bangladeshi nationals living there permanently. One could almost count them on the finger tips, even in the major cities like New York. I remember that the few times I visited New York City, I would stalk up on my supplies of South Asian spices from a few “Indian” shops or even from Chinese outlets as these were not available in Syracuse (NY) where I lived and studied then. Indian and a few Pakistani shops and restaurants in New York City were all that I could relate to as close to my social life and cultural requirements. The few Bangladeshis who had gone to the USA till then were mostly graduate students like me living in various campuses strewn about the huge country and did not constitute any major concentration, definitely not of any importance in commercial terms.

For the next twenty years or so this number gradually swelled by the influx of doctors, engineers, professor, and those of the educated middle class from Bangladesh, adding to the earlier graduate students, who by then were acquiring jobs and permanent residencies in the USA. Many of these educated ones landed there with valid passports and visas secured a job, not necessarily reflecting their skills or likings, but eventually attained the fabled “Green Card” through various means and even became citizens at some point in their life and could later build a career of choice.

Then came the “diversification visa” or the DV group. Lotteries were held in Bangladesh, like in other countries with lesser representation in the US population, on a yearly basis and tens of thousands got the opportunity to get a legal residency in the USA. These Bangladeshis drawn at random came from

all walks of life and from all corners of the country and their numbers only multiplied as they soon began to “sponsor” others, their relatives, to live in the USA. Many others migrated illegally. Today the Bangladeshis number in tens of thousands in any major city in the USA. In New York City alone the estimate varies from fifty thousand to hundred thousand plus, as some are residing there illegally and try not to get counted by the census authorities. Even in a smaller city like Philadelphia, there is a neighbourhood with nearly ten thousand Bangladeshis.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two populations. The first group, that of the educated, skilled people who travelled to the USA earlier constitutes what is often termed as a major “brain-drain” from Bangladesh. They not only settled in the USA but also took advantage of the residency facilities in Canada and Australia and their numbers continue to swell in these countries, seriously depleting the stock of educated and skilled Bangladeshis at home. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the country needed them most they chose to advance their personal careers and secure their lives from the political disturbances in Bangladesh, deserting the country. I remember that on the day I left Bangladesh for my graduate studies in 1976, there were 42 of us, university teachers, junior lecturers mostly, who boarded the only weekly flight to leave Dhaka for London. Just two of us returned to the country!

That set the tone for the next decade, anyone who had an education and could secure admission to a university programme in the USA or Canada, migrated with never having to return to the country which many considered “dusty and nasty”, other than visiting during the peaceful years, normally in winters when the temperature is cooler and the humidity is “tolerable” for their children. They are often identified as the migrating “winter birds”. I keep travelling to the USA every few years and have seen this population grow from graduate students to professors and deans, to MDs and to engineers serving their adopted country, while universities and institutions in Bangladesh that trained them in the first place lost their valuable services. The burgeoning middle class of the 1960s and 1970s, the force behind the very independence of the country, thus, by deserting the country created a vacuum that could never be filled and this has led to the serious deterioration of the academic standards and resulted in the absence of an effective civil society, which has been so much of a necessity over the years. But they chose the secure and comfortable life abroad looking from afar and criticizing the happenings of the country while those remained in the country faced untold hardships along with rest of the country on a day to day basis in its economy, politics and the social life in general.

To narrate a story of this desertion, during one of my travels to the USA in 1988 a dinner was arranged for me to meet a number of such doctors, engineers and professors residing in and around a small university town in Indiana by a relative of mine who was also a professor. More than a dozen of them dined with me that night and after the dinner people began to talk of the then President General Ershad and the political movement that was being waged in the country to oust him when one of guests addressed me directly and said “Why don’t you get rid of Ershad then we can go back to the country”. I was shocked, to say the least. He wanted those living in Bangladesh to fight against tyranny and create a peaceful atmosphere for them so that they could return. How selfish can one get? That is the nature of this group who only sought their own personal careers and secure a peaceful life away from the harsh political and economic realities back in Bangladesh that they despised and regularly cited as their sole cause for leaving the country. I also reminded him that by their absence from the country they are the ones largely responsible for the ugly political situation in the country in the first place. Their absence had created a vacuum in the civil society so that people such as President Ershad could take advantage of. Well, to cut the story short, living in such a Bangladesh of harsh realities we did succeed in throwing out the General from power but I do not think that any of those professors, doctors and engineers returned to the country.

This group is in sharp contrast to the later groups of Bangladeshis who come from a lower economic category, often uneducated and their life and work in the USA constitutes a heart warming story of pride and success. They are the DV group and thousands of other Bangladeshi “illegal aliens”, often students in their twenties, who somehow managed to land in the USA and began their journey there at

the lowest rung of the division of labour. In the migration story of the USA, successive ethnic groups, whether they be the Irish, or the Italians or the Jews or even the Indians and Pakistanis, they all started at the bottom and gradually moved up the economic ladder. In the 1970s and 1980s, I found the Indians and Pakistanis as the “taxi drivers” and waiters in restaurants. But by the 1990s many of these Indians and Pakistanis had moved up to buy shops and larger stores and start profitable businesses in places like Jackson Heights and Jamaica in the Queens Borough of New York City and gradually moving their residences out of New York City to New Jersey, Pennsylvania and beyond.

Today this Bangladeshi population is largely at the first and the second rungs of the division of labour there. If you hail a taxi in New York City, it is very likely that the driver will be a Bangladeshi. Go to a restaurant or a shop and you are like to discover some more Bangladeshis there as waiters or sales persons. On this tour I walked around Manhattan visiting museums, theaters as well as stores and restaurants and often sat in the parks and my favourite location, the little public space in front of the Macy’s. I have spent hours just looking at the people during this tourist season in New York. I was amazed to see the numbers of Bangladeshis, easily recognizable by their looks and dress and language. Indeed, I thought there were many more Bangladeshis than Indians or Pakistanis there. These latter groups have “moved out” by now only to be replaced by the Bangladeshis.

The real success story, however, is being played out back in Jackson Heights and in Jamaica, where the Bangladeshis have almost completely replaced the earlier migrants, the Indians or the Pakistanis. There, with my host who lives a few blocks away, I took an evening stroll through the Hillside Avenue from the crossing of the 179th Street down to the 169th Street. The whole area could easily have been identified as a part of Bangladesh, with neon signs announcing “Kawran Bazar” and “Dhanmondi Plaza” and “Dhaka Kabab Ghor”. Nearly all the shops, selling spices and vegetables typical of Bangladesh, clothes and other accessories patronized by the Bangladeshi community, were overflowing with Bangladeshi shoppers. And perhaps more typical of the Bangladeshi population, hundreds were loitering around the street corners munching on a “*shingara*” with a cup of tea in their hand engaging in a session of “*adda*”. Bangla, with accents various districts, was the only language you could hear. Heated discussions were raging about the recent terrorist attack in a Gulshan restaurant in Dhaka.

Back in the 1970s when I visited the China Town in New York City for the first time, I was quite taken aback by the street names and sign boards on shops written in Chinese language and may have silently wished to see the same in Bangla someday. Well, the street names on the Hillside Avenue are still in English but the sign boards on most of those shops are written in Bangla, proclaiming the proud identity of a country far, far away. I was also told that Bangla is officially recognized by the New York City government offices and hospitals and even by the telephone companies. And if someone needs attention in these places a Bangla interpreter is promptly arranged. There are schools for children who may get a bit of extra help in learning the language beyond what they are taught in homes.

All around the area, largely within the walking distance, are the residences of this Bangladeshi population, in apartment blocks and in independent houses. A larger concentration is in Jackson Heights. Whether a owner of a shop or just a sales person or a taxi driver, one feature that characterizes all families here is the intense desire to get their children through higher education. The father may be an aged taxi driver, but he is likely to have a son going to a university in the city. Most, if not all of this group also maintains an active connection with their families in Bangladesh and often sends a part of their hard earned income home. They also visit them whenever they can manage as I noted during my flight back home. The New York Abu Dhabi flight was largely filled by these Bangladeshi expatriates and they were visiting in the middle of the hot summer in Bangladesh! The second generation of this group is better educated and is better adapted to the culture there. Some I learned are working for major firms, including prominent financial corporations.

In general, the Bangladeshis are far better at obeying laws in a foreign country than at home and this is evidently true in New York City as well. The city government is pleased with this community with far

lesser incidence of crime than the previous ethnic groups who passed through New York. There are Bangla news papers published regularly to keep them informed of the news from home and even a regular television channel broadcasting to the Bangladeshis in the area along with the cable TV system offering channels directly from Bangladesh. Numerous Bangla “cultural programmes” with artists visiting from Bangladesh are organized in all major cities every year to keep them in touch with the native culture. Thus, this later group, facing far greater challenges, though they live in New York or other parts of the USA, their heart still beats with Bangladesh, unlike the other group, the educated middle class, who sold their heart long time ago.