

Building Bridges: Bangladeshi Diaspora in Canada

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Background

Millions of Bangladeshis are now in different countries; known as NRBs (non-resident Bangladeshis) or diasporas or immigrants or citizens. By now, there are 2nd or 3rd generations of diasporas living in different host countries. In the tone of Shakespeare, can't we say "what's in a name?" - definitely they are variously seen as one of the major sources of human capital, financial flows, transfer of trade and technology, economic opportunities, political support, and ambassadors of the home country. However, they are popularly known as "Diaspora" or NRBs. Countries like India, Israel and China aggressively using their diasporas in grabbing political and economic leadership globally.

Definition of diaspora: According to Wikipedia "the word "**diaspora**" came from Greek word "διασπορά" meaning "scattering, dispersion" i.e. is a scattered population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area. The word can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland. The word has come to refer particularly to historical mass dispersions of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from Europe, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the southern Chinese during the coolie slave trade, or the century-long exile of the Messenians under Spartan rule, its ties to the ancestral lands. Some diaspora communities maintain strong political ties with their homeland." (Wikipedia).

Initially the diasporas are forced to live their homeland and to migrate to another countries. But in recent considerations, people from Bangladesh, India, China etc. are migrating to developed countries like Canada, Australia, USA etc. on their own choice, mostly for economic reasons and better life expectations.

Bangladesh Diaspora in Canada

The Bangladeshis are staying abroad since long and a large number of them are already having their second or third generations there, mostly living in countries like America, Canada, UK, Australia and the Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Libya etc.). They are contributing to our economy. Many



of them are holding very high and prestigious positions. Most importantly members of the Bangladeshi diasporas can play a positive role in branding Bangladesh among the overseas investors in those countries as overseas ambassadors. It is the time now to take aggressive steps to organize these untapped resources. However, the government and different societies are planning to form forums



among the diasporas.

In Canada: It is understood from different researches and documents, Bangladeshi's started to migrate Canada from early 1960s, came here for studying in universities, mostly the teachers and students. They came to pursue higher studies – MS, PhD and professional training. Later they decided to stay (settle down) and not to going back to homeland. However, the flow of migration started to grow during and immediately after the war of liberation in 1971. The migration increased over the later decades, and reached its peak in the late 80s and mid 90s. Currently around 150,000-200,000 Bangladeshi-origin people are living in Canada. Bangladeshis live primarily in provinces like Ontario, British Columbia,

Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and major cities like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and Ottawa.

Are Canadians Curious about Bangladesh?

Though a large number of Canadians (and other North Americans and Europeans too) wear dresses labeled “Made in Bangladesh” made by our simple and hard working women, they are either not recognizing the importance of Bangladesh as expected or reluctant to accept the reality or not aware as such. (Hasan 2013)

Despite so much of positive attributes, business contributions and opportunities, why majority of the investors and policy planners are not raising their voice “we want Bangladesh to be our business partner; we have many things to take (import and learning) from them. And we have many things to give (export and sharing) them too.” People of Bangladesh are resilient with positive energy and rich cultural heritage. They are peace-loving by nature and contributing in Canada’s economy. Why many of the main stream Canadians or Bangladesh-born Canadians are not curious about this great nation?

Diasporas’ Contribution in Canada

Certainly, Bangladesh-born Canadians (or first/second generation Canadians) can play a significant role in creating economic and business links between these two great countries. In Canada, they are in business, education, skill development, real estate, health and community and many more. They are contributing by paying taxes. Moreover, these millions of Bangladeshis pumped in billions of dollars during and after immigration to Canada legally. The process is still going on and definitely helped growing Canada despite global economic recession. On the other hand, they have the willingness to collaborate with their home country too. They have the emotional connections.



The diasporas in Canada are contributing in Canada’s economy as

- Investors – entrepreneurs, real estate, IT, grocers, service etc.
- Customers – consuming goods and services
- Suppliers – labor force, goods and services
- Philanthropists – donation, senior citizen homes, orphans, churches, mosques etc.
- Ambassadors – representing Canada globally as a peace-loving business and educated community
- Civil society leaders and politics – actively involved in national, regional and local politics.

Diaspora profile: Majority of Bangladeshi diaspora are well educated and extremely qualified and skilled. In general they are family-oriented, hard working and cultural minded community. According to a recent research (Hasan 2013) “Almost 100% of the principal candidates who migrated are graduate and above. There are enormous PhDs, doctors, engineers and agriculturists. Many of them are holding very high positions. They are not only educated and skilled, but also pumping in money! The second generation Bangladeshis are also showing outstanding results and performances in Canada.” They have wealth of knowledge, resources, and expertise, which they are contributing toward shaping a stronger Canada than before. Bangladeshis, like other diaspora groups, are working together to brand Canada as a democratic, secular and multicultural country – a unique model globally.

Business and Trade Opportunities

The trade relation between Bangladesh and Canada is for more than four decades and it is growing manifolds in the recent decades. It is estimated that currently the two countries trade goods and services worth more than \$2 billion and it is expected to reach by around \$5 billion in next five years. Both the countries will be benefitted if proper strategic initiatives are undertaken and implemented.

According to Masud Rahman, President of Canadian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bangladesh, “the main Canadian exports to Bangladesh include cereals, legumes, oilseeds, iron and steel. Bangladesh imported wheat worth \$300 million in 2011. Canada’s primary imports from Bangladesh include knit apparel, woven apparel, textile article, headgear and seafood. There is an ample opportunities to export pharmaceuticals, software and IT services, plastic products, footwear and leather goods, ceramics, furniture and bicycles to Canada.” (Daily Star 2012)



Potential sectors for Canadian investors from Bangladesh: The potential sectors for Canadian investors are readymade garment, software and IT, pharmaceuticals, plastic products, footwear/leather goods, ceramics, bicycles, and power and infrastructure projects. Canada can also explore outsourcing cheap labor force or setting call centers. Moreover, the Canadian investors can set up factories for cutting and polishing of diamond and gold in Bangladesh (since labor cost is reasonably cheap compared to any South Asian countries). Currently Canada has to explore this service from India at a higher cost.

Potential sectors for Bangladeshi investors from Canada: Alberta has huge expertise on energy, oil and gas exploration. Since Bangladesh has a deficit in this sector, Canadian expertise and products and services can help improving our energy and power sector. Canada is rich in agricultural products (cereal, pulses, wheat, fruits, nuts etc.) which can be exported to Bangladesh. It can be mentioned here that currently Bangladesh is the largest Canadian agri-commodity buyer in South Asia.

Ambassador of Canada: The Bangladeshi community here in Canada not only consumes products and but also collectively forms a network, interacts with other communities and non-diasporic main stream people. Though they migrated, but still they maintain their original heritage, culture and practices. They do not disconnect their linkages with their country of origin - Bangladesh. They constantly maintain their links with their friends and families there in Bangladesh as well as with other members of their communities staying in different countries, such as UK, USA, Australia, Middle East and Africa.



These diasporas can be the ambassador of Canada within and outside Canada, and they can act as very powerful and influential force within Canada and in various parts of the world. According to Aziz (Abd-El-Aziz 2005), a researcher on Canadian diaspora said “they can act as “cultural brokers,” “communication highways,” “politicians,” and “transnational citizens” besides being “economic investors”. They will help branding this host country.

Economic growth: Bangladeshis are working as skilled workers and professionals (in universities/ colleges, researchers, IT, health, banks, consultants etc.). Many Bangladeshi-origin Canadians have also earned a name in businesses and entrepreneurships. Apart from medium and small business establishments, they are also in restaurants, groceries, boutiques, retail chains etc.

The economic growth in the developed countries (e.g. USA, UK, Greece, Spain, and even Canada) are severely challenged due to recent global economic recession and competition from the emerging countries such as China, India, Brazil, Russia, Malaysia etc. It is important to mention that these immigrant populations are making significant contributions for improving these host countries’ economic recession and help retaining upward economic growth.█

Global civil society and international lobbyist: Bangladeshi diasporas are culturally rich due to their thousands of years of heritage. They are sound at interacting with people of other cultural heritages as well. Since Bangladesh got liberation through a bloody war (where 30 millions of people sacrificed their

lives), this diasporas are very proactive toward any injustice, discrimination and undemocratic activities. They participate in any international protests and human rights movements for any oppressed community across the globe. They stand for establishing democratic processes. They raise awareness for any right-based issues and injustices. They represent Canada! They represent as international lobbyists where ever required.

Bangladesh has produced global leaders like Prof Muhammed Yunus, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and many more. Prof Yunus is the Nobel peace prize winner 2006 and founder of Grameen Bank, working to eradicate poverty and Sir Abed is Bangladeshi social worker, the founder and chairperson of BRAC, the world's largest NGO with over 100,000 employees, working for women and children globally. They are the members of global civil societies, who are equally contributing at home in their own societies, and in other societies across the world; they are for 'global society'. These Bangladeshi diasporas are very much linked and connected with these great people and they represent Canada internationally.

Diasporas' Contributions for Bangladesh

Diaspora can bring fortune for Bangladesh –

- **Remittances** - diasporas and NRBs are one of the major sources of generating foreign currencies through sending remittances; they are contributing in alleviating poverty from Bangladesh.
- **Intellectual resources** – there are thousands of highly qualified resources with international standard academic qualifications, professional certifications and skills. The diasporas in Canada are working in academic institutions, research agencies and different public and private organizations, such as Universities (Toronto, Guelph, McGill, McMaster, Alberta. etc.) colleges (Sheridan, Centennial, Seneca, Everest etc.) other business houses like Nielsen, Rogers, TD Bank, RBC, and government offices (Stat Canada, ministry of agriculture, health, hospitals/clinics, IT etc.). We can easily “retrieve” their knowledge and skills almost “free of cost”. They are willing to serve their motherland. Countries like India, China, the Philippines, Mexico, Sri Lanka etc. utilizes their support in building nations.
- **Economic development** – they can be the source of economic development for Bangladesh. They can also play a vital role in alleviating poverty. We can learn from Chinese and Indian experiences. Overseas Chinese communities are the great source of pursuing foreign direct investment in their country. China has taken the policy to attract foreign direct investment (FDIs) and open trade opportunities through their diasporas since 1990s which helped this country to emerge as a manufacturing and trading powerhouse globally. Similarly India has also launched diaspora policy about two decades ago for attracting their overseas communities. Indian diasporas are now actively contributing toward FDIs, technology transfer and joint venture business, employment opportunity through outsourcing, portfolio investment, and creating market for Indian products – consumer and industrial goods. The diasporas are also successful in creating market of Indian culture, most remarkably - Bollywood films!
- **Business and entrepreneurs** - these segments of resources are successfully competing and surviving in Canada and in other developed countries. They are using high-tech skills which can easily be shared and transferred in a developing country like Bangladesh and act like Business Consultants. Their business knowledge and skills can be transferred and help developing factories and industries and thereby generating revenue and creating employment opportunities. Recently, for example, Alpha Solar Energy – one of the leading Canadian companies created by a Bangladeshi diaspora has taken initiative to set up a first Green Factory in Bangladesh, funded by Bangladesh Government. Similar entrepreneurs may come forward in building country's economy.
- **Human capital** – Undoubtedly, there are enormous talents among the diaspora community, not only the recent immigrants those received higher and advanced education from different universities but

also acquired on-the-job training from their work places. There are also 1st and 2nd generation Bangladeshi-origin Canadians who are extremely talented and they are considered as world-class vibrant human capital. Initiatives should be taken to attract these human capitals from the diaspora community.

WHAT NEXT?

Need for Branding Bangladesh in Canada

Despite having achievements in different fields, why Bangladesh has been labeled with many negative images, either imaginary or genuine, over and over again? It is perhaps portrayed with all the negatives by a group of ill-motivated people both at home and abroad or country. They have ignored the commitment and performance of the resilient Bangladeshis. In addition, it has also been noticed that a group of international community compares Bangladesh with the extremely backward countries that are characterized by drugs, mafia, faith-based terrorists, and famine, while completely ignoring the reality.

Are we the only country with all the negatives? Definitely NO. There are corruptions, violence, and natural calamities in other countries since history, both in the developed and developing world. Social crimes and violence such as killing, bullying, home invasion, ethnic violence, terrorism etc. are very common in many developed and developing countries and become one of the major social problems. But ironically those countries are never or rarely branded negatively.



If the country is given a good image everywhere, other countries and foreigners will have a positive attitude toward it. They will become interested to know about Bangladesh first, and then will plan to visit it, and finally invest their hard earnings here. This is very important for instilling confidence in Bangladesh among them – be they investors, development partners, or tourists. Their investment will contribute directly to our GDP. Good branding campaign will help attracting FDI and will have direct impact upon the GDP.

Achievements in Bangladesh

Undoubtedly Bangladesh is one of the fastest expanding economies in the world with average GDP/annual growth rates ranging 6 percent since 2000, which is quite unique among the developing countries. It shows that this country has great potentials to participate in the growth of economic activities and relationships worldwide, including Canada.

The US Assistant Secretary, Robert O. Blake, Jr., recently said: “I’d be willing to bet that the clothes that a number of you are wearing today were made by some of the millions of Bangladeshi garment workers, the overwhelming majority of whom are women.” (Blake 2010). He further stated: “Bangladesh has reduced child mortality by more than two-thirds, and is on track to meet their 2015 target well ahead of schedule. They have also been particularly successful at reducing the number of chronically food insecure people - from 40 to 27 million - and at reducing gender inequality in schools and in the labor force. Steady economic growth over the last two decades has been another important factor in lifting millions of Bangladeshis out of poverty. Few people know that despite the global recession, the Bangladeshi economy has continued to maintain an economic growth rate of 5- 6% per year for almost two decades.”

Success stories for positive branding are –

Next 11 and Frontier 5: Goldman Sachs recognizes Bangladesh as one of the N11 (next eleven) countries; JP Morgan thinks that Bangladesh is one of the Frontier Five markets. Really, it is a country of millions of young, trainable, and hardworking people. In this country, one will find rapid industrialization growth, which is backed by IT facilities.

MDG: Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where it could achieve or made significant contribution toward achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG). On September 21, 2010, Bangladesh received an UN award for its remarkable achievements in attaining the MDGs particularly in reducing child mortality rate. Bangladesh was one of the six countries in the world honored for its outstanding achievement in meeting MDG targets, which were meant for eradicating extreme poverty and education and women throughout the world by 2015.

Garments: Bangladesh is now the world's second largest exporter of ready-made garments, after China. Samples of the clothes and dresses that are available in almost all the leading retailer chains worldwide (such as Wal-Mart, Sears, Hudson Bay, Target, Lablows etc.) are made by the millions of Bangladeshi garment workers, the overwhelming majority of whom are women. Around 3.5 million workers, mostly women, are engaged in making world-class readymade garments.

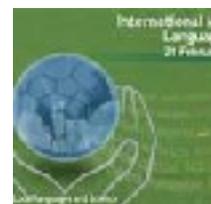
GNP growth rate 2002–13: Bangladesh consistently maintains Gross National Product (GNP) growth rate of around 6% that is well above the average GNP growth of the developing countries.

UN Peace Keeping Mission: Bangladesh in one of the highest contributors in UN Peace Keeping Mission. The mission is involved in restoring peace in many countries of the world. Since 1988, Bangladesh served in 30 countries by sending more than 92,000 Bangladeshi peace keepers. They are working as Goodwill ambassador of the country. It may be recalled, 98 peace keepers sacrificed their lives while restoring peace in those countries.

Micro-credit: Bangladesh is a land of social entrepreneurship/social business and micro finance innovation. NGOs like Grameen, BRAC, ASA, etc. are playing a very significant role in alleviating poverty, women empowerment and economic growth. In 2006, Yunus and the Grameen Bank were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for their efforts through microcredit to create economic and social development from below". (Nobel Committee 2006)

Moderate Muslim country with a rich cultural heritage: Perhaps most importantly, Bangladesh appears comfortable in its own skin: politically secular, religiously Muslim, and culturally Bangali. Bangladeshis celebrate the poetry, film, and literature of Hindus and Muslims equally (Dhume 2010). Bangladesh believes in respecting multicultural philosophy globally.

Bangladesh initiated **International Mother Language Day (IMLD)** and was proclaimed by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1999 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism across the world. IMLD was announced by UNESCO on 17 November 1999 and was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution establishing 2008 as the International Year of Languages. This day is observed with an aim to promote awareness of linguistic, multilingualism and cultural diversity.



Agriculture: This sector has made another success story. Here, rice production has increased by around 2 times in the last decade despite reduction of cultivable lands. Bangladesh has to feed the ever-growing population - from 110 million in 1990 to 160 million in 2013.

Health: Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has made a tremendous progress in the health sector. A revolution has been taking place during the last three decades in the area of adoption of birth control measures. Besides, child immunization and vaccination is a matter of great success in Bangladesh. Currently Bangladesh could protect 83% of the children from deadly diseases (like TB, Diphtheria, Pertusis, Tetanus, Poliomyelitis, Hepatitis-B, Measles and Haemophilus Influenza) and therefore, received an UN award for its remarkable achievements in 2010. Bangladesh has also made remarkable progress in manufacturing pharmaceutical products of international quality.

Shipbuilding: Ship building industry in Bangladesh is set to emerge as new export leader. It has already captured foreign investors from Germany, Holland, Denmark, Singapore etc. And many others are on the pipeline. Bangladesh is a potential destination for investment in shipbuilding industry. Bangladesh is the biggest source in the world for shipbuilding workers. There are about 10,000 steel ships plying in the inland and coastal water, all of which are built in the country.

ACTION PLAN

The Bangladeshis' immigration to Canada has always been a continuous process since 1960s. The diaspora community has commonalities in terms of their socio-economic characteristics such as language, food habit, dresses, family-values, cultural heritages and practices. Diasporas can definitely act as the Ambassadors of the country and they can help inviting investors to Bangladesh and thereby increasing FDI. Following steps may be taken -

Separate Ministry or Cell under the Prime Minister's Office – it is the time the government should immediately think about setting a separate ministry or cell to “utilize” these invaluable human resources and create a more conducive environment for them in Bangladesh to leverage these diaspora communities for 4 basis reasons (1) economic development (2) human capital, (3) trade and technology transfer, and (4) nation branding ambassadors. Countries like India, Israel and China – have taken all the efforts toward best use of the diasporas and taking their countries to a greater leadership role in the fields of academic, science and technology, economic development and global politics. We need to set aggressive strategies to pursue investment, trade and technology transfer through the Bangladeshi diaspora and raise foreign investment from them. The immigrants will feel that the country wants their support. The communication campaign must bombard the message to the diasporas and Non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB) that “your country wants you, your effort and your support. You are the ambassador and promote the way you can”.

Creating Research Cell to provide following services to the diasporas and Canadian investors/policy makers -

- Provide analytical, factual and updated information
- Provide information/update to queries on relevant issues
- Assist in creating the right connection and setting up business ventures
- Organize “Showcase Bangladesh” to promote and brand Bangladeshi products and services

Branding Bangladesh - strategic plan on how to provide a holistic view of Bangladesh to 2nd and 3rd generation diaspora which leads to a more interest within them about the country and its opportunity. Connecting them with their “roots”. Need to share the opportunities in Bangladesh related to job, consultancy, volunteer works, mentoring etc. Convert them into Ambassadors for Bangladesh through providing them with facts, analysis and the vibrant side of Bangladesh.

Promote diaspora among people in Bangladesh - many of us are not aware of the success stories of the diasporas, their children and families. We need to share the “Diaspora Story”; their success on an individual/enterprise level, thoughts of diaspora on different aspects of Bangladesh and their host country.

SUM-UP

Raise awareness about Bangladesh and diasporas -

- Bangladeshi organizations in Canada
- Websites for diasporas
- Social mobilization by individuals, forums, media
- Share diaspora success stories in Canada and Bangladesh

Raise awareness among Canadians -

- Strategic plan/policy - mid to long term

Role of Bangladesh government -

- Separate ministry or cell for diasporas
- Policy for diaspora – investment, ownership
- Bangladesh High Commission in Canada.

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