

TITLE: Bangladeshis in Australia

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I have been very pleased to read your published article heading (a ballpark translation) "Advancement of Bangla Literature and Music and the role of Ekushe Academy in Sydney" authored by Dr Qaiyum Parvez in late October. Later I found that it was a presentation in a seminar organised by Ekushe Academy held on 26 October, 2014 but for the sake of this discussion I will call it an article. I have to admit I have learned a lot from the article myself. I have to commend the author for touching on the history of present day settlement of Bangladeshis in Australia. I believe the author has left some vacant spots in revealing the history, that may be because he did not have adequate records of them. I believe he should have carried out more work or search on fact finding before the publication or presentation. My intention is only to fill up the gaps from my own knowledge of the history of Bangladeshi settlement. I apologise to write this in English as I donot have Bangla font in my computer.

First Bangladeshi organisation was not Bangladesh Association of Australia. It was in fact pre-liberation one called Bangladeshi Peoples Association and hence it was not nameless as stated. From memory, no positions were allocated in that organisation and all Bangladeshis were members. It was formed to provide legitimacy to the cause of our independence war and struggle and also to provide an identity to the people who were working on it and representing the nation here on this soil. As soon as Bangladesh was liberated on 16 December, 1971, with many other work in hand, the first task was to form a full-fledged Bangladesh community organisation. That gave birth to Bangladesh Association of Australia Inc. The first president was Mr Nazrul Islam and I was his General Secretary. I still have 1 or 2 copies of fully printed constitution which was a gift from Australian Mother-in-Law of late Mr Qamrul Huda (he was never a Dr.). The name of Mr Anwar Hossain was left out of the students list. He was also a great contributor to the independence work.

We were aware of late Alamgir Chowdhury aka Mazedul Karim Chowdhury. I had been fortunate to work with him. He was a good friend but I believe there is another gentleman who arrived quite close to his time. His name is Enamul Haque Chowdhury. Last I knew he was a resident of Canberra who also married a local white lady and settled here with his family. I have not heard of his passing, so he may still be alive.

The "White Australia Policy" to keep Australia white was adopted in late 1940's as Australian immigration policy but it was gradually eased by the incoming Holt government in 1967. Whitlam government was elected to power in Canberra on 2 December, 1972 and immediately following his election he got rid of a lot of archaic laws. White Australia policy was one of them. (refer: In 1973 the new Whitlam government took the final steps to remove the last vestiges of race as a factor in Australia's immigration provisions, "The Rise and Fall of White Australia Policy, 2001.)

Then came, of course, our Mr Nazrul Islam with his family in 1970 and so was Azam Chowdhury aka Nazmul Karim Chowdhury. The author seemed to have jumped from 1970 to 1972 leaving a vital gap when many things had happened to advance the cause of Bangladesh as a nation, its culture and language. Liberation of Bangladesh was most

celebrated event in the history which took place during that time. Apart from that there were some notable people arrived on this shore at that time. Among them was myself in October, 1971. My migration was approved on 25 October, 1970 one of the first one to have been granted so. I delayed coming here by a year. I still have a copy of the letter advising me the approval of my migration and the passport which I used to enter Australia. Those can be made available if anyone wants to view them. About 3 months before me was the arrival of Mr & Mrs Shahidur Rahman with their family. Mr Shahidur Rahman had unfortunately passed away, Mrs Shahidur Rahman is still living at their home in Cherrybrook. And then there were the arrival of three doctors Dr MRChowdhury, Dr Shahnawaz and Dr Feroz at a time when there was acute shortage of doctors in Australia. They went straight to work at Blacktown Hospital. Before the end of 1971 we saw the arrival of Dr Fazlul Huq with his family from UK and Mr Ali Hossain with his family who settled in Canberra. Then in early 1972 saw the arrival of three other families, Fraser, Stirling and Wilsons. Within a year or so we saw the arrival of our legendary Henry Gilbert who deservedly got a mention in the article.



Courtesy of Immigration Museum in Melbourne.

Unloading camels, Port Augusta, 1890s. [View images of Australia's cameleers](#)

I knew of the mosque at Broken Hill. It was established solely to cater for the religious needs of the Afghan Camel drivers who were muslims and they were brought in from Afghanistan and Pakistan from 1860 onwards along with 20,000 camels. According to Immigration Museum in Melbourne, the camel drivers were brought in because there were no skilled camel drivers available here. The camels were brought in as that was thought to be the best available means of transport for further exploring remote areas of this rugged and hot continent. Camels were also used for transporting the heavy equipment used for building the railway lines, telecommunication work etc. (refer: "History of Australia's Muslim Cameleers", Emma Young, 2010). In recognition of the services of Afghan camel drivers the

express train between Adelaide and Darwin is still called Ghan Express. These camel drivers were young men and had to marry local women to have a family life. As such they could not bring up their descendants as muslims. Therefore, their identities had disappeared with them. Some of Tabligh jamat followers visited the area a few years ago and came across some of those descendants who spoke to them how their forefathers used to pray. But they are not muslims.

I donot believe 1870 is the earliest time Bangalees had settled in this land. Some hypothesis had been postulated that when Capt Cook was sailing from England some of his English convict crews had died or some became too ill to row. So he desperately needed to replenish his sailing stock. While sailing thru Bay of Bengal he picked up some convicts from Calcutta. At that time and some years prior the invading East India Company had cemented their foot hold in India by defeating the Legendary Nawab of Bengal Nawab Siraj-ud- Doula. They were, of course, British convicts then and it is probable that they were Bangla-speaking regardless of whether they were muslims or hindus. Anyhow these theories as yet remain uncorroborated. Some hints had been found in that direction but requires further investigative search.

In 1974, when I went for my first holiday in Bangladesh from Australia, one of my village elders came and asked me in our Sylhet colloquialism “ I believe you have gone to Ostalia, baba.” I said, yes uncle, I have gone there to live. Then he said how is “habur bidge”. He of course meant Harbour Bridge. I agree with the author that these crew of merchant ships worked in the lowest of lower decks and never saw the light of the day till ships docked in a port, had jumped their ships from time to time. There were a few of them in our village. No record of them was kept by any one whenever they jumped as they were regarded then as third class citizens in a land which was adopted on principle to keep it as British. Jumping of the ship was not unusual. Even the British sailors jumped the ships en masse during gold rush days to get rich by digging gold. It was such a serious problem during those days so much so that ships did not have any crews left to sail it back to England. They had to bring in fresh supply of crews from England to sail them back.

Samia Khatun’s (apologies if the spelling is not correct) discovery of Bangla “kachachal Ambia” was an eye opener for me. I never knew such a thing was tucked in there. I have learned something. A few years ago I had been fortunate to have been present in a meeting of Islamic Council of NSW. It was discussing what to do with the dis-used mosque in Broken Hill. It was concluded to convert it into a museum with the collaboration of the local council. The main constraint was the budgetary issue and it still is. It is interesting to note that during the recent visit to Australia by Mr Modi, the Indian PM who in an address to the Australian Parliament mentioned that during early last century Indians had also fought in Gallipoli as part of ANZAC. The following day even the Australian PM admitted in a press conference that he did not himself know that Indians fought in the Gallipoli exercise. People are not aware of many such history which probably had included Bangalees as well.

Advancement of Bangla language and culture:

For those of us who were present here during the independence war and liberation time it was incumbent on them to show case Bangladesh in any way possible. Only less than a handful of us who were not students took part in the lecture tours of various places for growing public opinion and awareness of the new nation of Bangladesh. The other mode of showcasing Bangladesh was to organise cultural events. But where are the artists. One Mrs. Monika Mannan was on a short tour here and was in hand to make use. She was a singer, she trained a number of us to be cultural and Azam Chowdhury was culture-oriented man who could play musical instruments but too shy to sing in front of others. In those days of cultural famine even I had to go on stage to dance and sing in chorus. It was a wonder that the audience did not leave the hall. It was a massive response from Australians to witness what it called the food and culture of newly-liberated Bangladesh. It was held in the auditorium of Sydney University International hall. This function was organised towards the end of March 1972 coinciding the independence day. Our programs were very ambitious. We ventured to organising a Rabindra-Nazrul Joyonti event in June of that year when there were no artists to perform. We had to beg and borrow performers from other bank (I mean West, of course) of Bangla. In about a couple of years of liberation Mr Nazrul Islam left Sydney to work interstate. It was all left with us. In many functions we did not have anyone to perform a dance. We had to go with songs only and without dances. Among Fraser family's four sisters Noreen was very melodious singer and Stirling family's Lorraine was an avid dancer. With our own Mrs Shamim Rahman we could stitch a function together to put on stage. It was a nightmare to organise functions. If functions were organised without food then people would not turn up either. So that was another impost.

From mid 70's there was onrush of Banglaee migrants to Sydney. It went on like this to mid 80's when cracks became visible in the community. When you have more people, more problems emerge. By the second half 80's Bangladesh Association of Australia split up in line with demography like East and West. Bangladesh Association of Australia remained in the East and the split saw the evolution of Bangladesh Association of NSW in the West. That had resulted in splitting up of cultural performers as well. For us in the East at one stage immediately after the split we did not have any artist other than two singers to perform. One of them was Mrs Atia Nasreen Ghani who was God-sent on that day and another young lady who since then had settled in New Zealand. We had to go without any dance. I was cultural secretary then. It was a traumatising situation and did me slowly and painfully. We had organised puja functions as well as Christmas functions alongside muslims Eid reunions.

From even early 80's the community grew bigger and the children were growing. The community came to realisation that something will have to be done to cultivate culture and religious studies to the children. That eventually saw the rise of Bangladesh Cultural School in the East at Eastlakes Public school by some of us and Bangladesh Pathshala at Parramatta under the leadership of Dr Fazlul Huq. Both were running with community efforts and had curriculum designed to cater for Bangla language, religious and cultural studies.

The cultural school in the East had music and singing classes along side religious lessons and learning Bangla language. We offered our very small community of hindu faith to have their religious studies in the school. But they did not show much enthusiasm probably because it was not worth it for the small number that they were. Christians were even less interested because churches available everywhere to cater for their needs.

Running these schools was not easy. One had to go to that school religiously early on Sunday morning. Once school was finished the whole day was gone. That was the Sunday of the weekend both for the parents and the children. For me when my child finished the grade of the school I gave up going there but for Dr Huq he continued till long after his children finished the school. He provided the all-needed leadership support for best part of at least 20 years. None of these sacrifices of the community qualified to get even a mention in the authors' article. I was staggered because it was very unfair and unjust.

The birth of Bangla Prosher Committee eveloved from a meeting in Solicitor David Bitel's office with Rothin Mukherjee, Professors Mukherjee and Debesh Bhattacharya, myself and Prof. Fazlur Rahman and some others I cannot recall. Then at some stage the leadership was handed to Bimal Maity who came from Melbourne where he led to put Bangla in Victorian school Curriculum. I also worked with him as his vice-president for a while. I am very happy to see that Bangla Prosher Committee is continuing its good work to put Bangla into NSW school Curriculum.

The formation of Bangladesh Islamic Centre and the establishment of Sefton Mosque itself speaks volumes, so I will leave this subject for another day.

I am not convinced that the author had accorded full credit to all who deserved. I am sure it is not deliberate but more work and search should have been carried out in preparing the article.

In conclusion, I would like to add that as we all know Bangla is our proud language. We would like to keep our beloved language and culture alive and well into our next generation and generations after wherever we live. To advance this common goal I think Bangla Academy , Ekushe Academy and Bangla Prosher Committee are doing an excellent job. They should be accorded our unstinted helping hand in every way possible. I salute the long list of the contributors the author had provided in the article. I envy them as I did not have that luxury of talented pool in hand to work from. I pass my best wishes to them for their work and sacrifices in advancing our language and culture in this land of opportunities in which we are all very fortunate to live in. Once again I stress that we have one of very high profile communities Australia has ever had. I wish we all carry out more of good work with unity and friendship and less acrimony. For me I am at the twilight of my life. I am fortunate and had a good innings here by the grace of God almighty. I hope you all have a good, peaceful and happy life ahead. I apologise if I had hurt any ones feelings. Thank you.