# "Temple of my Heart":
# Understanding Religious Space in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi Community

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## *Abstract*

In this thesis, I offer new insight into the Hindu Bangladeshi community of Montreal, Quebec, and its relationship to community religious space. The thesis centers on the role of the Montreal Sanatan Dharma Temple (MSDT), formally inaugurated in 2014, as a community locus for Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis. I contend that owning temple space is deeply tied to the community's mission to preserve what its leaders term "cultural authenticity" while at the same time allowing this emerging community to emplace itself in innovative ways in Canada. I document how the acquisition of community space in Montreal has emerged as a central strategy to emplace and renew Hindu Bangladeshi culture in Canada. Paradoxically, the creation of a distinct Hindu Bangladeshi temple and the 'traditional' rites enacted there promote the integration and belonging of Bangladeshi Hindus in Canada. The relationship of Hindu-Bangladeshi migrants to community religious space offers useful insight on a contemporary vision of Hindu authenticity in a transnational context.

## *Résumé*

Dans cette thèse, je présente un aperçu de la communauté hindoue bangladaise de Montréal, au Québec, et surtout sa relation avec l'espace religieux communautaire. La thèse s'appuie sur le rôle du temple Sanatan Dharma de Montréal (MSDT), inauguré officiellement en 2014, en tant que point focal communautaire pour les Bangladeshis hindous de Montréal. J'avance que le fait que la communauté soit propriétaire de l'espace du temple est profondément lié à sa mission de préserver ce que ses dirigeants qualifient d'«authenticité culturelle», tout en permettant à cette communauté émergente de s'intégrer de manière novatrice au Canada. Je documente comment l'acquisition de l'espace communautaire à Montréal est apparue comme une stratégie primordiale pour implanter de façon renouvelée la culture bangladaise hindoue au Canada. Paradoxalement, la création d'un temple hindou bangladais distinct et les rites «traditionnels» qui y sont pratiqués favorisent l'intégration et l'appartenance des Hindous Bangladeshis au Canada. La relation entre les migrants hindous-bangladais et l'espace religieux communautaire offre un aperçu utile d'une vision contemporaine de l'authenticité hindoue dans un contexte transnational.

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# Introduction

Shortly after midnight on the 26th of March 1971, *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal)[1] Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then-leader of the Pakistani Awami League, declared the region of East Pakistan as an independent republic that would thenceforth be known as Bangladesh— the "land (*desh*) of the Bengalis." In an English-language announcement that could be accessed through an EPR radio communication system, Sheikh Mujib's message that night went as follows:

> ... From today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh wherever you might be and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved ("Declaration of Independence").

This change in nomenclature from "East Pakistan" to "Bangladesh" was momentous as it signaled a de-alignment from the state's Partition-era Muslim-religious identity as half of Pakistan (East Pakistan) to a new "Bangla" ethno-linguistic identification by language and region that ostensibly transcended religious difference, incorporating Bengali-speaking Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, Christians, and so on, in an autonomous state, "Bangladesh." Almost simultaneously with this declaration of the pre-eminence of Bengali identity, however, the West Pakistan army launched an offensive of genocidal proportions on the civilian population in its Eastern wing, which began the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). Many of the details

[1] Born in the East Bengal district of Faridpur, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975), was the first president and popularly accepted founding father of an independent Bangladesh. He was a prominent leader during both, the Bengali language movement in the early 1950s, and the East Bengal Independence movement that emerged in the latter half of the 1950s. He was appointed leader of the East Pakistan Awami League which led the struggle against West Pakistan's military and political establishment for an independent Bangladesh. The Awami League that he led still exists under the name of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and is one of the two major Bangladeshi political parties. This party, which is now headed by his daughter Sheikh Hasina Wazed, is also the current ruling party in Bangladesh ("Rahman, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur"). More relevant biographical details on Sheikh Mujib's life will appear in later sections of this thesis.

concerning the story of this conflict are fiercely contested (as discussed in greater detail in Chapter One); however, the confrontation concluded quickly with a decisive victory for the various Bangladeshi freedom fighter factions and their allies from the Indian army against the West Pakistani troops on 16th of December, 1971 (Van Schendel 172). [2]

Since 1971, the nature of Bangladeshi national identity remains hotly disputed within the country, and the social and constitutional ramifications of that split have been a source of considerable strife. A key question for the region's statehood centers upon the negotiation of being a "Muslim" state—as it was under East Pakistan—or being a "Bengali" state, as an ethno-linguistic regional identity that transcended religious differences. In the nearly five decades since then, anxieties related to the stability of their nation's sociopolitical system, as well as concerns over personal safety, have led over seven million Bangladeshis of all faiths to emigrate overseas—in addition to those that have settled elsewhere in South Asia—thereby making Bangladesh the source of world's fifth-largest diasporic population (United Nations Population Division). The threat of sectarian animosity between Bangladesh's Muslim majority and its religious minorities erupted into violence particularly in 1975 and 1992, setting into motion in the years after these events an exodus of Bangladeshi Hindus from their homeland. Many Bangladeshi Hindus chose to settle in Canada, encouraged by perceptions of the nation as more open to asylum seekers.

As of 2016, as many as a 100,000 Bangladeshis called Canada their home, of whom 18% were residing in Quebec ("Brown Canada: Bangladeshi-Canadians"; Canadian Magazine of Immigration). At least 6,000 Bangladeshi Montrealers are Hindus, members of Bangladesh's

[2] This event is celebrated as a national holiday in Bangladesh, and by different overseas Bangladeshi groups as *Bijoy Dibosh* (Victory Day) (Van Schendel 172).

largest religious minority.[3] Most community members arrived in Canada between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, following increased political tensions and riots, which shattered the nation they had long called home. Rendered spiritually homeless by the ordeals of sectarian conflict and transnational migration, the identity of Hindu Bangladeshis in the Canadian diaspora remained subject to flux and fragmentation.

*Chapter Outline and Scope of Project*

While a comprehensive study of Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community is beyond the scope of this M.A. thesis, I offer insight into this understudied community through long-term ethnographic research on the Hindu Bangladeshi community's path to temple ownership and management (2014-2017). Since 2014, Hindu Bangladeshis have inaugurated two temples in Ville-Emard, the Montreal neighborhood where most members of the city's diasporic population reside.[4] My research was centered upon the older of the two sites, the Montreal Sanatan Dharma Temple (MSDT). Following the work of French geographers Bernard Debarbieux and Pierre-Yves Trouillet, I argue that the MSDT functions as a kind of *haut lieu*, or a place erected by its founders to spatially represent cultural symbols that distinguish Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis (Debarbieux 5–6) (Trouillet 2). In framing and substantiating my argument, I have divided this thesis into three chapters, followed by a brief conclusion.

In Chapter One, I provide historical perspective on majoritarian politics in Bangladesh and the "othering" of its Hindu minority by state and non-state actors during the colonial, East

[3] Ascertaining an accurate estimate of Montreal's Bangladeshi diaspora is difficult for several reasons. In the most recent census (in 2011) respondents were offered the categories of South Asian, Bangladeshi and Bengali as options describing their origins (NHS Profile, Montréal, V, Quebec, 2011), so some respondents may have selected multiple categories. Also, only 20% of the general Montreal population participated in this study.

[4] My interlocutors believe that there may be at least five Hindu-Bangladeshi owned temples in Ontario and Quebec.

Pakistan (1947-1971), and the post-1971 eras of Bangladeshi history. The chapter unfolds with a discussion of different models of Bengali nationalism, both secular and sectarian. My categorization of these models is drawn from the writings of scholars such as Shelley Feldman, Willem van Schendel, and Haimanti Roy. Following the work of the renowned historian of pre-modern Bengal (1000-1800), Richard Eaton, I situate the roots of these models in Bengal's geographic location as a cultural and territorial frontier between Sanskritic and Islamicate civilizations. While historically, the relationships between Bengal's different religious communities have included elements of tension, spaces have always existed wherein the conflicts between the region's religious groups could be negotiated. Furthermore, these spaces have also functioned as sites wherein the theological and conceptual boundaries between the region's religions could be contested and re-drawn—including, notably, Bengal's Baul tradition. The Baul movement offers a successful example of such negotiation, one that, as I contend in later sections of the thesis, is continued by members of Bangladeshi civic society in diverse ways.[5] The characterization of Bengali Hindu and Muslim identities as inherently opposed emerged following the establishment of British rule in the region. Such a strict separation arose, more specifically, in the wake of a nineteenth century cultural movement that is now referred to as the Bengali Renaissance. Many of the cultural hallmarks of contemporary Bengali identity, such as a standardized language and regionally specific musical and literary styles were established over the course of this period. While I will explore this theme of Bengali culture

[5] I do not intend to draw parallels between Bangladeshi secular activism in contemporary times and *Bauliana* traditions because the two movements are grounded on very different ideological premises. While contemporary secular activism in Bangladesh is predominantly areligious and urban (Yasmin; Guhathakurta, "Amidst the Winds of Change: The Hindu Minority in Bangladesh" 299), the Bauls draw their support from Bengal's largely rural landscape, and embrace tropes and motifs that may be classified as religious. Despite these difference, the social outcomes that the two groups aspire towards are nonetheless similar in nature. Additionally, by linking the two in a single sentence, I aim to encourage readers to investigate the blurry, if not arbitrary divisions between that which is considered sacred and that which is considered secular.

throughout the thesis, it is important to note that the production of these hallmarks is tied to the exposure members of Bengal's Hindu and Muslim aristocracy received to Euro-American models of nationalism during the Renaissance. Contact with these theories had a profound impact on the ways in which Bengali elites framed discourses of nation building, identity and social space. They were, in turn, encouraged to conceive of their lands as intrinsically Muslim or Hindu. The association of land with communalized identities gave rise to pan-Indian Hindu and Muslim nationalist movements in the early twentieth century, and that ultimately led towards the 1947 partitioning of the Greater Bengal region into Hindu-majority regions in the West that were granted to India, and Muslim-majority regions in the East that were first administered by Pakistan, and finally by Bangladesh. Although the Bangladeshi nation-state was imagined by its founders as a homeland for Bengalis of all religious backgrounds, Renaissance-era constructions of East Bengal as a fundamentally Muslim nation continue to influence the state's definitions of Bangladeshi citizenship. This, along with the economic hardships that they share with co-nationals, has consequently contributed towards marginalizing Bangladeshi Hindus and has spurred their departure from their ancestral lands.

The historical review that I provide in Chapter One is a necessary step in understanding that the Bengali diaspora is not a homogenous entity. The data in this chapter is derived from historical accounts that I have contextualized further through my interviews with key interlocutors in the Hindu Bangladeshi community who lived through these events. Of these interviews, the testimony of Dileep Karmaker features prominently.[6] As detailed in Dileep's account, members of Bengali diasporic communities originate from bordering territories that are

[6] Having migrated to Canada in 1995, Dileep has a day job as a nursing assistant at the Montreal General Hospital (MGH). He is also a prominent community activist and frequently spearheads campaigns to shed light on atrocities inflicted upon members of Bangladesh's religious minorities.

today divided between the Indian and Bangladeshi nation-states. Although both Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis speak the same language and share many other cultural traits, Bengali (*Bangla*), they adhere primarily to two different religions and embody different territorial identities (Ghosh 230). Apart from the religious differences that have been alluded to already, Indian Bengalis tend to experience their Bengali-ness as a regional identity while Bangladeshis express Bengali-ness as a national identity (Ghosh 230). As such, Chapter Two addresses these themes by presenting additional contextual perspectives regarding the study of transnational Bengalis, understood again through the testimonies of three Montreal-based interlocutors,[7] and scholarship that describes overseas Bangladeshi contexts in the United Kingdom. As I document here, the Bangladeshi population of Canada is predominantly composed of migrants from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh.[8] As Sylhet's distinct history sets it apart from other Bengali regions on historical and cultural grounds, this identity is of particular importance for understanding the nuances of the Hindu Bangladeshi community in Canada. After discussing some of these distinguishing characteristics, I focus on Sylhet's special role as a regional hub for Bangladeshi migration to the United Kingdom. Citing scholars of British-Bangladeshi communities such as Claire Alexander and Sebastian Rasinger, I describe how longstanding ties between Sylhet and the UK have prompted large groups of men and women from the region to migrate to Western cities and establish an extensive network connecting overseas Sylheti settlements. This

[7] The names of these interlocutors are Jhumur Chakraborty, Bhanu Lal Dey Chowdhury, and Sharmila Dhar. Apart from the biographical details that their interviews reveal, a more detailed listing of relevant biographical details may be found in Appendix 1.

[8] There is a significant contingent of Bangladeshis from non-Sylheti backgrounds in Montreal. Three of my interlocutors, for example, hail from Barisal, a district south of Dhaka. Furthermore, there are a few Montreal-based Bangladeshi associations dedicated to non-Sylheti Bangladeshis. These include *Chittagong Somiti Montreal*, a group managed by immigrants from the Chittagong and Noakhali districts. Still, despite the presence of these other subgroups, all my interlocutors have stressed that Sylhetis dominate overseas Bangladeshi circles (at least among Hindus), including the MSDT.

discussion allowed me to piece together some of the formative moments of Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community, strongly interconnected to London's Sylheti population, as told by two prominent Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers, Bhanu Lal Dey Chowdhury (who migrated to Montreal in the 1970s) and Sharmila Dhar (who arrived in Quebec almost 20 years after). As detailed here, Bhanu's and Sharmila's memories of migration from Bangladesh to Montreal have several thematic differences but share the common experience of being new immigrants with few skills and resources available to serve them in new national contexts. However, by tapping into community-based networks, both acquired the confidence that was necessary to oversee large-scale businesses and provide support to other members of their community. I argue that an entrepreneurial spirit, cultivated by key individuals like Sharmila and Bhanu, has been essential in preparing Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis to become temple owners. Exploring the ways in which this spirit was nurtured by members of this community serves as an appropriate introduction to the extra-religious factors that distinguish the Bangladeshi and Indian segments of Montreal's Bengali diaspora.

In my thesis's third and concluding chapter, I offer a detailed account of the Hindu Bangladeshi community's initial years in Montreal and experiences during this period, which led to the community's yearning for an autonomous religious center. I begin with an analysis of the role played by religion in anchoring fractured diasporic identities. This is followed by a re-telling of the formation of a distinct Indian Hindu population in Montreal and its efforts to crystallize community activities in fixed temple spaces. In their first years, Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers organized their religious gatherings at the margins of Indian-owned spaces. For at least ten years, Hindu Bangladeshis conducted their religious ceremonies in collaboration with Indian groups such as Montreal's Hindi-speaking and Indian Bengali populations. However, as I learned

through interviews that I conducted with community members who were present during these years,[9] each population grew larger in size through the 1990s, so that religious spaces that were once shared by these communities became increasingly separate. The growing distinctions between these diasporas prompted Hindu Bangladeshis to seek recognition for their own ethno-religious particularism. The need for recognition, I contend, has motivated their desire to own—rather than share or rent—its own religious centers. This, in turn, marks the genesis of the Montreal Sanatan Dharma Temple (MSDT).

*Literature Review and Methodology*

My ethnographic account of Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis and the MSDT congregation is pioneering in its discussion of this community's rites and their reaction to nationalism in their former homeland.[10] As Feldman notes, much has been written about on Hindu families that have left East Pakistan/Bangladesh to specifically settle in West Bengal (Feldman 19). Much less has been written about Hindus that chose to remain in the land of their birth and adopt Bangladeshi citizenship. Some of the investigations that address the subject of Bangladeshi Hindus focus primarily on their role as victims of violence between warring political factions, particularly during national election campaigns (Guhathakurta 2002; Kabir 1980; Mohsin 2004). Others have

[9] The testimonies of Shaktibrata Haldar (who migrated to Canada in 1991), his younger brother Sudha Haldar (who migrated in 1994), and Rithish Chakraborty (1982), were most helpful in allowing me to piece this history together.

[10] In an ethnography on Chinese Buddhist temples in United States, Fenggang Yang discusses the issues scholars of immigrant religion face in their use of the term 'congregation' to describe American Buddhist worship communities (Yang 566). The idea of a religious congregation in a Western sense, he writes, denotes individuals that swear an exclusive commitment to a sectarian denomination or church group after having formally sought membership or baptism. Immigrant devotees at the temples Yang studies "do not formally join these temples since they 'belong' by their heritage" (p. 64)…many immigrants may simultaneously attend/patronize multiple temples, like their counterparts at home countries usually do" (Yang 566). I have observed the same worship patterns among Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers who, while generally committed to the maintenance and success of the MSDT, have no qualms about patronizing other Hindu temples in Montreal. In fact, my interlocutors have recounted isolated cases of families choosing to host personal pujas at non-Bangladeshi temples to avoid being implicated in the institutional rivalries that separate the MSDT from the other Bangladeshi-owned temple (see chapter 3). Hence, I follow Yang's example and employ the term with some hesitation. I use it, in a most general sense to refer to a religious community.

studied how they have been affected by politically influential strongmen that utilize discriminatory Pakistan-era laws including the Vested Property Act to illegally occupy Hindu-owned land (Feldman 2016; Barkat 2000; Barkat, Zaman et al 2008) . However, as scholars such as Ali Riaz (2003) and Meghna Guhathakurta (2002; 2012) point out, by framing the persecution of Hindu Bangladeshis as purely political or economic, one overlooks everyday examples of social exclusion that Hindus endure due to ongoing othering of their religious identities by the Bangladeshi-Muslim majority. Although Riaz and Guhathakurta provide evocative testimonies of anti-Hindu violence in book chapters and academic essays, I am yet to come across a book-length study (in English) where the ethnographic method is used to assess the impact such marginalization has had on Hindu Bangladeshi lives and community building efforts.[11]

There are very few mentions of overseas Hindus in research projects focusing on the European- and North America-based Bangladeshi diasporas. Cursory references are made to religious minorities in two PhD dissertations written by McGill university students on Canadian Bangladeshis (Ahmed 1997; Ahsan 2015). In a recently published article, Tahseen Shams, a doctoral candidate at the Department of Sociology in the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), introduces readers to the tense relations between Hindu and Muslim members of the Los Angeles-based Bangladeshi diaspora (Shams 2017). While Shams's ethnography provides valuable understandings on how social cleavages from Bangladesh are perpetuated in transnational contexts, her inquiry pays little independent attention to the Hindu Bangladeshi diaspora. The virtual absence of Hindu voices in literature concerning transnational Bangladeshis may, in part, be related to the ongoing disassociation of Hindu and Bangladeshi identities, as

[11] Bengali fiction has covered this subject to some extent. Of the different books and novels that offer honest portrayals of the struggles Bangladeshi Hindus face, Taslima Nasreen's *Lojja* (1993), has received the most international attention. Nasrin received countless death threats for writing this novel and has been living under exile in various countries ever since (Stockholm).

well as the related process of equating Bangladeshi Hindus as not even Bangladeshis, but as citizens of India. Considering this speculation, I argue that it is imperative that more attention is paid to this understudied diasporic community.

My analysis is based largely on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between March 2014 and July 2017 at the MSDT. Over a period of three years, I participated in and observed ritual activities at the temple site. All in all, I may have made at least thirty field visits to the MSDT on major calendrical festivals and on non-festival days (see *Ethnographic Sources*). In addition to attending the daily puja and special celebrations including the annual Durga, Kali and Saraswati Pujas, I observed an array of separate ceremonies arranged by other Montreal-based Hindu Bangladeshi associations who use the MSDT's premises. Of these events, I participated at least seven times in the monthly *pathachakras* (prayer circles) hosted by the Montreal Vedanta Society, the local branch of the Ramakrishna Mission.[12] To familiarize myself with more subtle community dynamics of the MSDT congregation, I became involved in projects organized by a Bengali theatre company named *Rabi Anuragi* (Devotees of Rabindranath) in 2015. Drawing performers from local Hindu Bengali youth and senior citizens, this group stages plays written by the renowned Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) at the MSDT's annual Durga Puja.[13] My participation in *Rabi Anuragi*'s ventures served as gateway facilitating my immersion in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community. Moreover, it compelled me to make

[12] Although the global headquarters of this Hindu organization is in Kolkata, the group is extremely popular among Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis, who dominate the local worship community. As Bhanu Dey Chowdhury and Nabendra Das's testimonies in chapter 2 suggest, the nationalist rhetoric propagated by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the founder of this organization, is a source of spiritual strength for many Hindu Bangladeshis that feel disempowered by the ongoing discrimination that they encounter in their ancestral land.

[13] I deliberately use the word Bengali, rather than Bangladeshi here as many members of this company are either native West Bengalis (*ghotis*), or are Bangladeshis that lived in Kolkata for many years before relocating to Montreal. This theatre group is one of the few venues where Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis function as equal collaborators.

several field visits during the busiest period of MSDT's ritual cycle. The experience allowed me to become a more confident Bengali (*Bangla*) speaker and eventually helped me to adopt Bengali as the primary language in my fieldwork. It also brought me into contact with as many as fifty different persons whom I got to know well over the last three years. Although short and informal interactions with each of these individuals have inspired distinct moments of my research, I present in this thesis findings based on eleven key interviews (see *Ethnographic Sources*). While the selection of these interlocutors was somewhat random, my choices were motivated principally by a desire to represent as many voices from within the community to a larger public. I therefore tried to choose interlocutors that offered perspective across a varied set of ages, marital statuses, socioeconomic backgrounds, and caste groups. Additionally, I selected interlocutors who could attest to different moments in the community's struggle towards temple ownership. In short, the aim of my selections was to highlight the diverse origins of this group of Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers whose life stories converge as they become collective owners of the MSDT.

*Reflections on Researcher's Subjectivity*

I was first acquainted with Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community in 2010 when I was an undergraduate student at McGill University. While seeking a lift back home from a Kathak dance class, I was introduced to the father of a classmate, Mr. Shaktibrata Haldar, henceforth "Manu Da" ("Brother Manu"), who graciously offered to drop me off at my destination. During that ride, I was pleasantly surprised to hear Manu Da speak to his daughters in Sylheti, a Bengali dialect that is also spoken by my grandparents. We bonded over our shared heritage and slowly developed a friendship that has endured until today. I quickly learned that

Manu Da was a pioneering figure in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community and that he was deeply connected with most collective activities that it organized. Although I did attend a few Hindu Bangladeshi events that Manu Da invited me to, my interest in studying the community did not emerge until I became an MA candidate at the Faculty of Religious Studied (FRS) in January 2014. I participated in a graduate seminar entitled *RELG 544: Ethnography as Method* during the first semester of my studies that was supervised by my thesis advisor, Dr. Andrea Marion Pinkney. When Manu Da called to invite me to MSDT's inauguration, I discovered the opportunity to prepare a term paper documenting the event that would also fulfill the requirements of this seminar. The process of writing that term paper in 2014's Winter semester planted the seeds that grew into a sustained engagement with the MSDT and the Hindu Bangladeshi community. Having taken note of my interest in documenting their narratives over the course of these three years, community leaders have often extended me personal invitations to visit their homes and to share meals with them, while offering their observations regarding issues ranging from food recipes to local and global politics. Since then, the scope of my involvement in the MSDT community has expanded and I consciously participate in its activities as both community member and ethnographer.

The complex and productive relationship between these subjectivities as an anthropological observer and as an implicated insider is exemplified in my experience at the MSDT's inauguration. When I entered the temple at 11:30 am on that afternoon, I was greeted by the familiar faces of several men and women who, over the last couple of years, I had learned to address by Hindu Bengali terms of kinship like Dada (Brother), Boudi (Sister-in-law), Didi (Elder sister), and Mama (Uncle). After exchanging greetings, I found a corner to stand at the back of the temple's congregation hall where I could unobtrusively observe people's reactions to

the ceremony and write down my impressions and field notes as text messages that I sent to myself. By sharing the same skin color as most members of the congregation, wearing a Panjabi kurta like many of the male attendees—and staying glued to my smartphone like the hundreds of guests who had taken out their devices to take photos and videos of the festivities—I appeared inconspicuous in the crowd. My decision to blend into the gathering was intentional. Through camouflaging myself as an ordinary person in the melee of devotees and visitors, I sought to create for myself an experience of the event resembling that of an average Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealer. Subsequently, I intended to capture this experience within the limitations of a university term paper and thesis. While my connection to the subjectivity that I aimed to report can only be partial at best, I was momentarily absorbed into a context that was highly unlike that of my everyday life, where I am a postgraduate student at a secular, English-language, Canadian university. Over the course of the ceremony's proceedings, I was one with this community that was huddled together within a congested space directly in front of newly sculpted, marble icons of heavily ornamented Hindu divinities. When Himanish Goswami, a London-based performer of Bengali kirtans who was flown in specifically for the *udbodhon* (inauguration), broke out into song, I danced beside many of my *Dada*s and *Boudi*s (brothers and sisters). Similarly, when Dimitrios Beis, the handsome mayor of the Roxboro-Pierrefonds borough and special guest at the event, charmed the community by offering congratulatory words in Bengali, I let out a bright smile alongside everyone next to me.[14] While there were many memorable moments I witnessed that afternoon, one stands out in particular as a small, yet powerful display of devotion that took place during the *udbodhon*. This rite is crucially important as it is the moment when the temple's

[14] He ended his congratulatory speech with the words, *Apnader abhinondon* (My congratulations to all of you). I recorded parts of this speech that I later uploaded onto YouTube. The video clearly shows Manu Da and Sharmila Boudi, the MCs of the *udbodhon*, beaming with joy as Mr. Beis made this concluding statement.

divine images as ritually transformed from inanimate objects into living embodiments of the divine. At the moment of the images' enlivening (*prana pratishtha*), I noticed an elderly woman standing in a quiet corner of the assembly (Figure 6). With her eyes closed, her head bowed, and her palms folded reverentially in prayer, I observed her cry softly as the gods were summoned to life. In my hybrid state of ethnographer-insider, I understood why she was crying. Far away from an imagined homeland where, in the community's view, aspects of her selfhood were consistently othered by both political and non-political actors, she had finally found a space wherein the multifarious elements of her heritage could be respected and valued as legitimate.

The overwhelming nature of the emotions that I felt that day have stayed with me ever since, and have led me to feel a deep-seated sense of solidarity with members of Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community and the various ordeals that they have encountered in their voyage towards establishing the MSDT. To highlight my shared solidarity with the MSDT congregation, I have deliberately chosen to refer to my interlocutors in the familiar terms that I address them by in my regular interactions with them. By using these terms, I endeavor to offer readers an intimate glimpse into a community that takes displays of fraternal affection very seriously. Such displays have been instrumental in assembling the stories and narratives to which I now turn.

# Chapter One: "Othering" Bangladeshi Hindus at Home and Transnationally

> I am disheartened with all that I see happening around me,
> Yet, I shall still proclaim:
> 'I honor again and again, my Bangladesh,
> Forever beautiful, forever fragrant'
>
> Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), Bangladesh's national poet[15]

## *Introduction*

In this chapter, I provide an overview of different models of Bengali nationalism, using a historical account to explain the evolution of contemporary definitions of Bangladeshi citizenship and its impact on Hindu Bangladeshis' sense of dislocation. In an essay entitled 'Dreaming of a Golden Bengal: Discontinuities of Place and Identity in South Asia' (2009), geographer Reece Jones refers to the independence of Bangladesh as a major event in both world, and South Asian history for two significant reasons. First, Jones states that: "during the forty-year period after the end of World War II, the Bangladeshi independence movement was the only successful non-decolonization secessionist movement worldwide" (Jones 373). Second, he notes that the Bangladeshi independence movement proposed a new paradigm for defining national identity in South Asia, one that departed from the models provided by the Indian and

[15] Bengali original: *Chardike Atow Kichu Ghote Jachche; Monta Besh Kharap…Tarporeo Bolbo. 'Nomo Nomo Nomo Bangladesho Momo, Chiromonoromo, Chiromodhur.*' An excerpt from this poem was extracted by by the Montreal-based *Robindro Songeet* singer Mrs. Soma Chowdhury (Soma Di) on her Facebook account on January 8, 2014. Soma Di posted this status in response to episodes of communal violence that followed the Bangladeshi national elections in January 2014. Of the two major national parties, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and its ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), which formed the official opposition in the previous political term, boycotted the election and called for voters to do the same following building tensions between itself and its traditional rival and the ruling party, the Awami League (AL). Many Bangladeshi Hindus who have traditionally supported the AL, defied this boycott and went out to vote in the election that resulted in an AL victory. In retaliation, goons and student activists with alleged ties to the BNP and the JeI, perpetrated several acts of violence against Hindu communities in various districts across the country. To provide an example of the kind of violence Hindus faced in the aftermath of this election, The Minority Rights International organization's 2016 report on Bangladesh states that: "an estimated 500 Hindu families from Gopalpur village alone lost their homes in the violence" (*Under Threat: The Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Bangldesh* 8). The proclamation that Soma Di quotes is an excerpt from a famous poem written by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), Bangladesh's national poet.

Pakistani examples. Rejecting both "the pan-Indian identity category that included a mixture of languages, cultural practices and religions" and "the Pakistani identity category that was defined exclusively in terms of religion", the earliest articulations of Bangladeshi nationalism emphasized a presumed ethnic, rather than religious basis for belonging to a new nation-state (Jones 374). Jones provides evidence for this claim by citing a popular slogan that was used during the liberation struggle, which translates into the following: "Hindus of Bengal, Christians of Bengal, Buddhists of Bengal, Muslims of Bengal, We are all Bengali" (Jones 374). [16] In the initial aftermath of the 1971 war, this slogan was used in a government poster urging national unity (Figure 1). Showing a Hindu temple, a mosque, a Buddhist pagoda, and a church, all lined up in a row, the poster asserts that despite their religious differences, Bengalis of all faiths were equal citizens of Bangladesh.

[16] The original reads as follows: *"Banglar Hindu, Banglar Kristan, Banglar Buddha, Banglar Musalman, Amra Sobai Bangali".* It was also adapted as the title of a song to protest the Pakistani regime, which was recorded by many top Bengali singers including Shyamal Mitra (1929-1987) from Kolkata (https://www.youtube.Com/watch?v=GGBNwhH6wm4). In this song, the Bengali language is likened to a religion itself, whose saints include both Hindu and Muslim figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Subhas Chandra Bose, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Sheikh Mujib. The lyrics of this song suggest that ethnolinguistic factors indeed determined the ideal citizens of the early Bangladeshi nation-state. The fact that members of the Kolkata-based entertainment industry were participants in the process of developing music for this nationalist ideology indicates that the early Bangladeshi state may have also included Indian Bengalis as votaries of its vision.

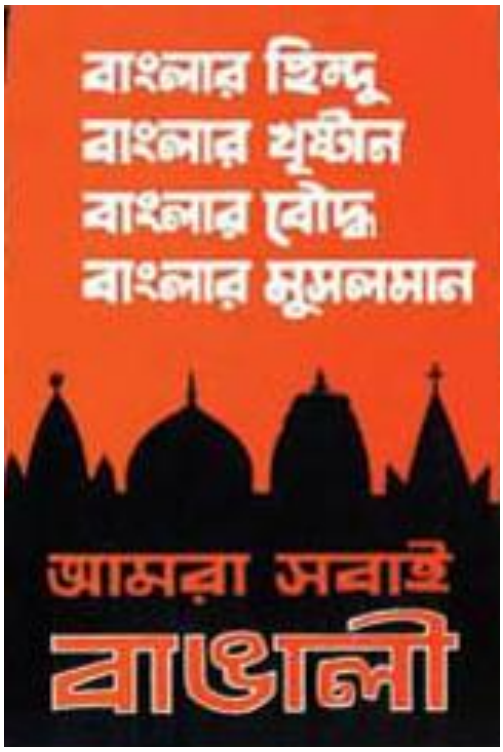


Figure 1: "We are All Bengalis" (*Amra Sobai Bangali*)
Source: Jones 374

In recent years, however, the place of non-Muslims in Bangladesh has come to be less clearly defined so that Hindu Bangladeshis and members of other non-Muslim Bangladeshi communities are often marginalized. While Bangladesh continues to represent the country with by far the largest Hindu minority in the world (11 million as compared with less than one million in Pakistan), several commentators have recognized that the proportion of Hindus in Bangladesh has steadily declined since 1971 (Van Schendel 261). From constituting almost 13% in 1971, the proportion of Hindus in Bangladesh today has decreased to a mere 9%. Analysts of what is often called the 'minority issue' within Bangladesh estimate that at least 5.3 million Hindus have migrated from Bangladesh since 1947; this is considered analogous to at least five hundred people disappearing on a daily basis from a country with an area equivalent to that of the American state of Wisconsin (Riaz 8). These statistics are brought under further scrutiny with the

study of the religious demographics of the Bangladeshi population in Canadian cities like Montreal, where almost a third of the community is Hindu.

To explore these questions, I follow the work of the Cornell University-based sociologist Shelley Feldman who, in her essay "The Hindu as Other: State, Law, and Land Relations in Contemporary Bangladesh" (2016), studies how Hindu citizens of Bangladesh are constructed conceptually, by both the law and in everyday practices of social inclusion, as internal aliens whose allegiance to the country is always suspect (Feldman 1). I will provide an overarching summary of momentous events in the past century of first East Bengali, and then East Pakistani and finally Bangladeshi history, to demonstrate how current-day conditions of majority domination have developed. This summary will permit me to conduct an analysis of different models of nationalism, both sectarian and secular, that have shaped the events described. And finally, I will reflect upon the consequences of these opposing nationalist models for Bangladeshi Hindus. The feeling of being marginalized in their own country on religious grounds has compelled many Bangladeshi Hindus to migrate overseas. Anecdotally, Chaitali Saha, a Toronto-based interlocutor whose parents were Bangladeshi civil servants, noted succinctly that: "[s]ome people have a tough time believing that there still are Hindus left in Bangladesh!" During our interview, she recounted an experience from 2010 where, upon being introduced to the parents of a Muslim Bangladeshi friend, her friend's father asked her where she was from in Kolkata. After clarifying that she was in fact Bangladeshi, the parents continued to insist that she must be Indian, not Bangladeshi, saying: "Well, where in Kolkata is your house?" Chaitali's account suggests that the contemporary conceptualization of Bangladeshi citizenship does indeed seem to view non-Muslim religious minorities as if they were foreigners in a land that they helped create. In what follows, I will provide a condensed re-telling of events that have transpired in the recent

and not-so-recent past to enable a clearer understanding of why it is that the nationalities of people like Chaitali are brought into question.

*The Inner and Outer Spheres: Colonial Interactions and South Asian Modernity*

Scholars of South Asian modernity, including Peter van der Veer and Partha Chatterjee, trace the epistemic roots of nation-building processes in South Asia to social transformations begun during Western imperialism (Uddin 5). In *'The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories'* (1993), Chatterjee writes that "nationalism (as defined by scholars like Benedict Anderson) was generally considered one of Europe's most magnificent gifts to the rest of the world"(Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 4).[17] Although Chatterjee expresses some level of satisfaction with Anderson's analyses on the

[17] The setting for this quote is provided by Chatterjee's very brief discussion of geopolitical circumstances in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. He uses this discussion to trace the genealogy of nationalistic conceptions that, at the time of his writing, were viewed "as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force[s]…threatening the orderly calm of civilized life" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 4). This characterization however, he notes, was coated with "hopeless prejudice" for, as reflected in literature on the subject from as early as the 1950s, "nationalism was…regarded as a feature of the victorious anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 4). In subsequent decades, the idea of nationalism and its associated dangers were increasingly linked with ethnic conflicts in parts of the world that were peripheral to Euro-America. The irony that can be found in this description however, as Chatterjee argues, is that post-colonial nationalisms in these regions are products of Western involvement in the political and pedagogical structures of these countries during colonialism. Hence, Chatterjee implicitly exposes the hypocrisies inherent in political discourses that construct the national identities of post-Cold War Western nation-states as inherently antithetical to Eastern ones. This strategy ultimately absolves Western polities of any responsibility in Third World conflicts stemming from nationalist rhetoric. Chatterjee advances a similar conversation on the subject in an earlier publication, 'Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?' (1986), Chatterjee, with an intention for critique, cites what he calls "a less celebrated article" of the influential political philosopher from what he terms the "rationalist-liberal" school, John Plamenatz (1912-1975). In the article in question, Plamenatz draws a distinction between two types of nationalisms; the western type emerged primarily in Western European nations such as Britain and France and the eastern type was present in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World : A Derivative Discourse?* 1). The western type upheld what Plamenatz believed were the classical aims of nationalism, namely the liberty for all the nation's members. While committed, in principle, to offering liberty to all its citizens, the eastern type was ultimately corrupted or deviant as it required the people of the East to adopt "a universal standard of progress" which was fundamentally alien to its cultures. In assuming a passive position with regards to conflicts that stem from nationalism in the East, Western countries effectively perpetuate colonial stereotypes which privilege the West as a beacon of enlightenment and reason, in contrast to the emotional and hierarchical East. Additionally, this sort of framing constructs the West as the producer of modernity in opposition to the East which perpetually consumes Western modernity (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 5).

phenomenon of nationalism, he raises an objection that is important for our purposes in this chapter. Rather than dismiss nationalisms in the rest of the world as being caricatures of models provided by Euro-America, as he believes Anderson does, Chatterjee recognizes that nationalist rhetoric in Asia and Africa emerges not out of a desire to imitate Western models but to operate precisely on the premise of asserting difference from "the modular forms of the national society propagated by the modern West" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 5).

Such an assertion of difference, Chatterjee writes, permitted nationalist elites in South Asia—faced with a diminished personal political status under colonialism—to contest imperial power and to construct their own realm of authority, first within and later against colonial society (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 6). To do so, they divided the world of social institutions and practices that they themselves subscribed to into what Chatterjee identifies as two distinct spheres—an outer, material sphere of economics, statecraft, science and technology considered objective and universal and an inner, spiritual sphere which was constructed around the essentialized marks of cultural identity. In the outer sphere, the superiority of the West had to be acknowledged. Therefore, to catch up with Occidental accomplishments in domains such as economics, statecraft and science, subaltern people had to study and replicate Western methods. Conversely, the spiritual sphere differentiated Eastern nations from the West, and their spiritual values were a symbol of their cultural superiority over the population of colonizers. The perceived need to preserve the spiritual distinctiveness of the East only increased in relation to their successes in imitating

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This type of construction sets up an unfair hierarchy in the study of the world whereby studying the West is equated to studying the universal; this therefore relegates the study of the East to obscure area studies departments in Western universities.

Western skills in the material sphere (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 6).

Specific areas from within this inner sphere that are relevant to our purposes (all which Chatterjee discusses more elaborately in later sections of 'The Nation and its Fragments') include language, historiography, religious practice, and religiosity. Awareness of this combination helps us to better comprehend the post-colonial nationalisms that guide the Bengali case study addressed in this thesis. In subsequent sections of this chapter, I shall discuss how important moments in Bengali history have helped shaped different notions of the Bengali homeland. The clash between these notions, I conclude, leads to conditions wherein groups such as Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis are constructed as 'different' or 'other' in their homeland (Feldman 1).

*Bengal Community Formations in Historical Perspective*

Competing visions of Bangladeshi nationhood are inextricably linked to Bengal's geographical emplacement as a space of multiple frontiers, both territorial and cultural. Today, the region that Bengali nationalists define as Greater Bengal is divided amongst two countries—India and Bangladesh. Within India, the region deemed to be Bengali includes parts of the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam (specifically, its southernmost extremities) and in the independent nation of Bangladesh it constitutes its easternmost limit (Figure 2). Nestled between the Ganges and Brahmaputra River Deltas on the eastern coastline of the Indian subcontinent, Bengali-speakers have long been concentrated in regions dominated by hundreds of rivers and ponds. This has led to an extensive fishing industry, and to the heavy use of fish in both Hindu and Muslim styles of Bengali cuisine. Teams of archaeologists from Dhaka's Jahangirnagar University have discovered the presence of a four-thousand year old sedentary population in the

area ("4,000-Year Old Settlement Unearthed in Bangladesh"). Historically, it has been identified by various academics including van Schendel and Richard Eaton as the Eastern frontier of different South Asian civilizations, both Islamicate and Sanskritic (Van Schendel 24).

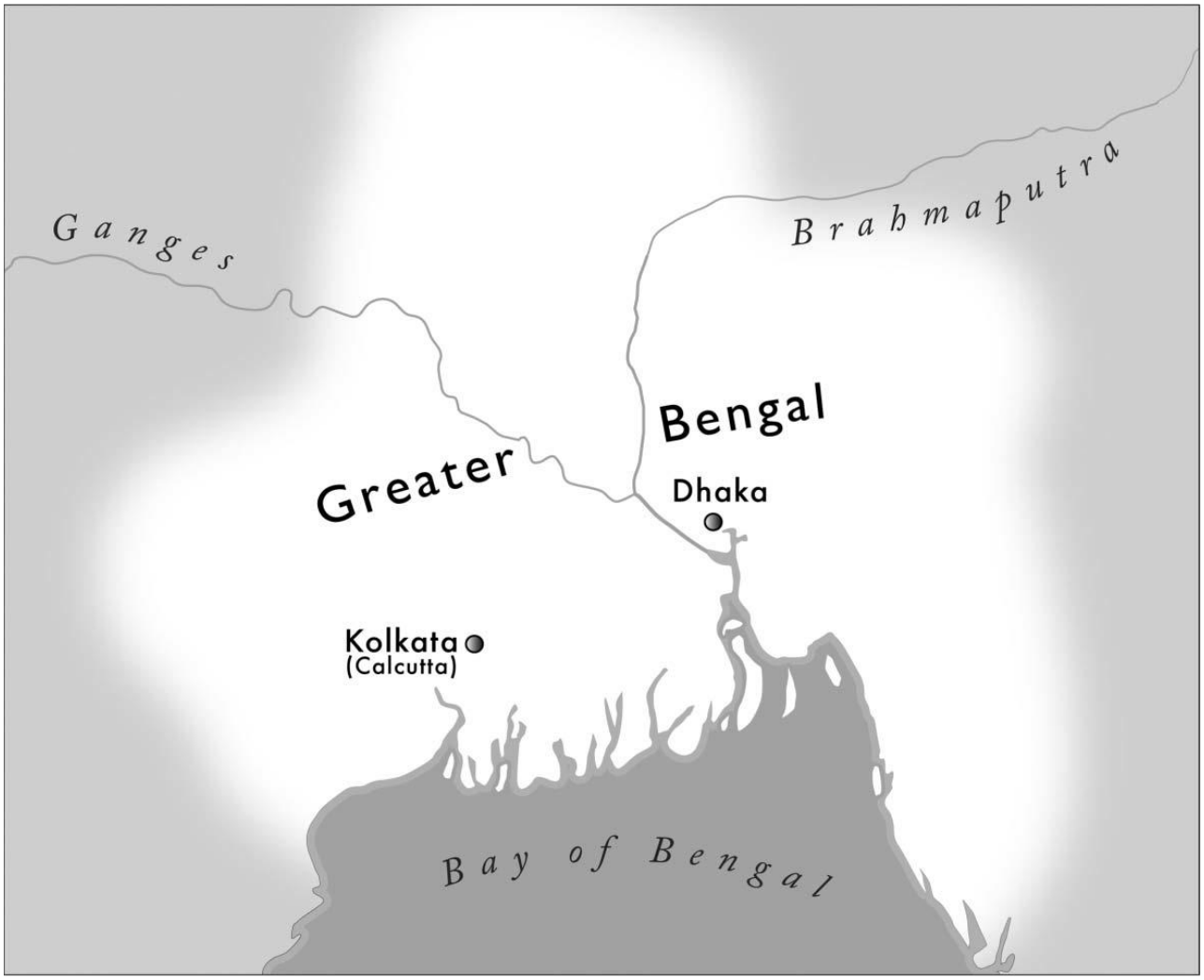


Figure 2: Greater Bengal (Reece 377)

Some modern Bengalis trace the founding of their nation to the *Vanga* kingdom, a state that is mentioned in both early Buddhist texts and in Sanskrit *Itihāsa* literature. Its inhabitants are described therein as different in ethnicity from the people of *Āryāvarta*, the Northwest Indian Vedic heartland, and the land of Vanga itself as being "impure/improper for Aryan settlement"

(Harder 301). This ancient perception of the land of Bengal as being impure is reflected in the development of caste in the region where even the highest non-Brahmin castes continue to be ritually considered *Śūdra*. The region was annexed by the Magadha kingdom in the 4th century BCE and has been affected by the various political developments that have touched North Indian civilization since. However, there is little architectural or textual evidence to show that the religious movements that emerged in North India prior to the 10th century CE profoundly impacted the area (Harder 301). Classical Hinduism was introduced to Bengal during the reign of the Sena Empire (11th to 13th centuries). The Senas patronized the Śaiva-Śākta traditions and incorporated several local pre-Sena gods and Goddesses thereby forming a distinctively localized style of Hinduism (Harder 302).

Islam entered Bengal in two waves. It was first introduced by Arab and Persian merchants who traded with Bengali merchants at port cities such as Samandar, a city which some historians believe existed on the site of contemporary Chittagong (Van Schendel 27). From the 12th century onwards, Islam entered Bengal through the land route when Central Asian Muslim invaders displaced local Hindu Bengali monarchs, after having conquering other South Asian kingdoms. While their control over the region was mediated through local proxies, some of which came to establish governments of their own, the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE) and the Mughal Empire (1526-1857) included Bengal amongst their South Asian territories. During the reign of the latter, Bengal became the most prosperous region of the Empire. Additionally, the majority of Bengal's rural population adopted Islam, which, in other parts of Mughal India, was a largely urban creed. Bengal's Eastern half was especially Islamized during Mughal rule. Unlike the region's Western areas, East Bengal was heavily forested and dominated by a vast spread of marshlands. To exploit the land's agricultural potential, Mughal officials encouraged colonists

from Western and Northern Bengal to migrate to these regions, clear the forests, and replace them with rice-fields (Van Schendel 31). The newly established populations were largely comprised of individuals from fisherfolk and farming communities who traditionally occupied lower ranks in the Hindu social system and who faced fewer caste-related restrictions with regards to resettling in lands across water bodies. This may support Richard Eaton's suggestion that East Bengal's Islamization may be attributed to "Classical Hinduism's relatively late appearance in these parts" (Eaton 102).

Nevertheless, despite the large-scale conversions during Mughal rule, the state did not actively promote Islam at the expense of weakening the belief systems of the region's non-Muslim subjects. In fact, Mughal-era Bengal saw the development of various localized syncretic cultures that actively resisted a bipolar division of social identities of monotheist Muslim or polytheistic Hindu as not only mutually exclusive but rigidly oppositional. A significant illustration of Bengali tradition as mosaic is the musical-oral heritage of the Baul community of mystic minstrels that remain remarkably popular in present times. Laying a strong emphasis on the unity of human experience and transcendence of religious difference, the Bauls composed in various literary and musical genres that incorporated motifs from Hindu *Shakta* and *Vaishnava* devotional traditions, and those of the Sufi Muslims. While orthodox clerics from each of these traditions emphasized the incompatibilities between their belief systems, the Bauls stressed spiritual unity rather than opposition. The legacy of groups like the Bauls is an important part of the foundations of secular models of Bengali nationalism.

The political power exercised by the Mughals and their regional vassals over the *Bangal Subah* was displaced by the British East India Company whose military defeated the combined forces of soldiers from the armies of the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, a nominal subordinate of the

Mughals, and his French allies at the 1757 Battle of Polashi (Plassey). The Company's ascendancy that followed its victory in this battle compelled the Emperor to award it with the *diwani*, or the ultimate right to collect revenues from the province's inhabitants in 1765. As the British consolidated their control over Bengal, they positioned the province as the pre-eminent region in the British Empire. Additionally, they introduced various systemic reforms that radically altered administrative, cultural, and educational institutions in the province. Although a comprehensive discussion of these innovations is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following will be discussed considering their relevance to our present exposition on Bengali nationalism.

Van Schendel observes that the British intended to surpass their predecessors in their capacity to extract as much income as was possible from their Bengali possession (Van Schendel 57). In a scheme known as the Permanent Settlement, they bequeathed the *zamindars*, the traditional community of hereditary landowners during Mughal rule, with more power than that which they previously yielded. Initiated in 1790, variants of this scheme survived until the 1950s and thereby left an indelible stamp on social and economic class-relations across the province. Although the British wielded the ultimate property rights of all land in Bengal, the zamindars were granted ownership over the territories they oversaw. The onus to invest in the agricultural development of the land was also borne by the zamindars. In exchange for these rights, a fixed land tax was set which the zamindars were required to pay within regular intervals in perpetuity. The failure to comply with these regulations would place zamindars in a disagreeable situation where their lands would be publicly auctioned. Even though the British expectation in implementing the Permanent Scheme was to provide zamindars with incentives to stimulate economic progress in lands that they owned, the arrangement empowered zamindars with responsibilities that extended beyond their traditional roles as tax-collectors (Van Schendel 59).

Many zamindars re-invented themselves as the de-facto *raja*s of their lands and formed a native class of elites during Company rule. To preserve their social privileges, they often employed corrupt strategies that increased their incomes exponentially. Often, the zamindars illegally increased the rents of their tenants and forced them, on pain of physical harm, to contribute supplementary taxes in support of their excessive lifestyles. As this system unfolded in later years, many Bengali zamindars established bureaucratic structures that functioned in tandem with the British Indian civil service. The eventual outcome of these processes was the creation of a multi-tiered social hierarchy where landlords and their closest intermediaries reaped the maximum profits from their lands. Numerous instances of the corruption of zamindars and exploitation of peasants working their lands have been chronicled in both scholarship and oral histories. In what may have been a move to present historical continuities with groups that exercised social prestige in former times, the Mughals appointed several individuals from the elite Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha castes as zamindars (Harder 302). These classes preserved their privileged statuses under British rule. While it was not rare to find both Muslim *zamindars* (landholders) and Hindu cultivators during this period, tenant farmers in Bengal's Eastern regions tended to be overwhelmingly Muslim for reasons described previously. This crucial difference between the demographic compositions of Bengal's Eastern and Western halves became decidedly salient in future centuries as new modalities of identity-based politics emerged during late colonial rule.

At the end of British rule, as much as eighty percent of all urban property and as much as seventy-five percent of rural land in East Bengal was owned by Hindu zamindars (Van Schendel 139; Feldman 6). Estimates from the early 1950s have valued the collective worth of these landholdings to be as high as 870 million rupees or US$ 182,700,000. Many of these zamindars

were absentees who lived in urban areas like Kolkata and Dhaka and left administrative duties to different go-betweens who mediated contact between proprietors and their sharecroppers. In the buildup to the Partition, the Muslim League promised East Bengal's Muslim peasants that the new state "would bring deliverance from oppressive Hindu landlords" (Van Schendel 116). [18] When the League formed Pakistan, they acted upon its promise by dismantling the Permanent Settlement system. The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 eliminated previous privileges that Bengal's zamindars and their various intermediates enjoyed. In its place, all landlords were made tenants who reported directly to the government of Pakistan. Additionally, a ceiling of approximately thirteen hectares per family thirteen hectares per family was imposed in regard to landholdings (Van Schendel 139). The Act operated on the twinned intentions of increasing tax revenues for the fledgling state and of prompting land reforms that would empower cultivators by having property ownership transferred directly to them. In practice, the ultimate implementation of this law brought very little benefit to the poorest farmers it aimed to emancipate. In the early years after the Partition, where notions of nationality, residence, and loyalty to the state were especially contested in partitioned territories like Bengal and Punjab, actors on both sides of the border exploited the ensuing confusion, including the rapid change of property right over large areas of land. For example, in newly-created East Pakistan, control over entire swathes of estates discarded by Hindu zamindars estates was assumed by the estate's former employees, who easily depicted their status as being equivalent to tenancy, advancing their social status in the new state as upper or middle-level intermediaries

[18] Van Schendel cites several anti-landlord agitations that sprung up in the 1930s and which reached their apex in 1946-47 during the Tebhaga Movement (Van Schendel 89). Although a number of these movements may indeed have been emboldened by promises by the Muslim League, Van Schendel notes that the Communist Party of India (CPI) was also highly instrumental in organizing Bengal's tenant farmers against zamindar hegemony. Given the different challenges posed to traditional forms of authority, it is important to resist viewing tensions between landlords and sharecroppers in solely religious terms.

(Van Schendel 139). To circumvent the legislation pertaining to land ceiling limits, this new class of landowners registered their excess properties in the names of different dependents, thus ensuring that these lands remained family property. In the aftermath of such corrupt practices, cultivators were re-presented as daily wage laborers whose hereditary ties to the lands they worked on were declared void (Van Schendel 139–140). As such, for many East Pakistani citizens, Partition did very little to alleviate the social injustices it sought to eliminate.

Unlike the rapid and comprehensive nature of the population exchanges that accompanied the demarcation of Indian and Pakistani borders in Punjab, the course of the equally massive Bengal Partition was much slower, and more complicated (Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 1–15; Van Schendel 101). As Feldman convincingly asserts, for most of its existence, the East Pakistani nationalist project utilized the issue of land reform to institutionalize the otherness of its Hindus inhabitants and to render their patriotism as suspicious (Feldman 4, 6). As early as 1948, the Pakistani state instituted laws that allowed it to seize the lands and estates evacuated by Hindu zamindars leaving East Pakistan for India. Until the requirement of a passport to travel between East Pakistan and India was introduced in 1953, many Bengalis of varying religious backgrounds and economic statuses crossed the open border several times a year and maintained assets in both territories. During this period, scholars like Feldman and Haimanti Roy cite various cases in which both East Pakistani authorities in collaboration local Muslims fraudulently re-possessed Hindu landholdings, justifying their encroachment by proclaiming the temporary absence of their landowners (Feldman 6–9; Roy 146). In other cases, Hindus who had initially chosen to remain in East Pakistan were threatened and coerced to sign over their lands before feeling compelled to migrate. Hindus who escaped these initial instances of land grabbing were targeted again in 1965 amid the India-Pakistan War, which took place

between the months of April and September 1965. Claiming the pre-eminence of preserving unity among its Muslim citizens, Pakistan's then-leader, General Ayub Khan, officially declared India as Pakistan's national enemy and issued orders "authorizing the confiscation of all interests of the enemy" (Feldman 6). These orders set into motion the passing of several Property Acts from 1965 until 1971 that invested the government with powers to seize what it termed enemy properties (Feldman 6). The newly passed laws were often used by the state to expropriate lands that were officially registered under the names of now-Indian citizens, but subsequently bequeathed to the guardianship of Hindu relatives that remained in native villages that were now in East Pakistan. In other instances, many East Pakistani Hindus who were known to have extensive ties and business dealings on both sides of the border were simply denounced as enemies of the state by authorities or by Muslim rivals in their neighborhoods that wished to settle long-standing feuds (Feldman 6–7). By acting upon nationalized suspicions towards and by manipulating the property acts, the rights of citizenship of Hindu-minority citizens of East Pakistan were flouted, therein legitimizing the state's seizure of Hindu-owned land. In doing as such, the state sought to erase ties between its Hindu minority and the lands of their ancestors. This exercise, Feldman writes, was crucial for sustaining the founding myths of Pakistan's nation-building processes.

The roots of Bengali resistance to Pakistani pan-Muslim nationalist agendas pre-date the founding of East Pakistan. Bengal's Eastern and Western units had been previously divided in 1905 by the British Indian government. Politically, the basis for this division rested on the claim that the Bengal Presidency was too big to administer as a single entity.[19] However, many

[19] Although the limits of its border varied during its existence, the Bengal Presidency primarily included the geographical areas which today are the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, all the Northeast Indian states and Bangladesh. From the 1880s until the 1930s, it also included Burma. The latter fact explains why Bengali population in Burma's urban centers was as extensive as it was until its independence in 1948. As they often

Bengalis of both Hindu and Muslim persuasions saw it as a well-calculated British ploy to weaken anti-colonial movements which were particularly strong in Bengal (Van Schendel 79). As such, they organized an effective resistance movement which highlighted cultural motifs and symbols that united rather than divided Bengalis (Roy 10). For example, Rabindranath Tagore's famous poem, *Amar Sonar Bangla,* which was adopted as the Bangladeshi national anthem in 1972, was composed in 1906 during this period of anti-colonial struggle. Avoiding all kinds of religious imagery, the song underlined Bengal's "golden soil" as the mother of all its inhabitants thereby establishing a connecting bond between Hindus, and Muslims as children of the Bengali nation (Jones 378). Although the robust opposition to this scheme eventually compelled the British to reverse the Partition in 1911, the resistance movement exposed significant cracks in the political alliances formed between Bengal's Hindu and Muslim elites. In prior decades, during a historical period that is today referred to as the Bengali Renaissance, Bengali Hindus and Muslims emerged as increasingly separate communities. Social and cultural changes that were introduced by the colonial state created conditions wherein Hindu and Muslim intellectuals were schooled and indoctrinated in Hegelian understandings of history. While elite Hindus envisaged a future wherein the glories of a Puranic past would be restored, their *ashraf* Muslim counterparts rekindled memories of their community's splendor during the Mughal Empire and the Delhi Sultanate. Members of each group of social elites viewed the other as resident outsiders whose contributions to composite Bengali culture that they had hitherto shared needed to be derecognized (Subho Basu 53). In response to these ideological shifts, the following cultural traits were produced during the Bengali Renaissance. A standardized written Bengali was

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functioned as the Asian face of the colonial government, Bengalis were particularly resented by the Burmese and were especially repressed in post-colonial Myanmar. The state's current assault on its Rohingya minority is a legacy of these colonial tensions.

developed during the nineteenth-century that reflected the dialect spoken by upper-caste Hindu elites from West Bengal's Nadia region. To render this linguistic register as more eloquent, writers and intellectuals adopted Sanskrit terms to replace Persian or Arabic equivalents that were once used in vernacular Bengali (Uddin 75). The gradual normalizing of this process led to a false association between Hinduism and Bengali language. Upper-caste, Calcutta-based writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay reinforced these epistemological constructions of Bengali history by calling for a written history of Bengal purged of Muslim inputs. In this worldview, Bengali Hindus were, as such, sons of the soil and their cultural styles were taken as normative (Subho Basu 56–57; Jones 376). In addition to comprising the main bulk of Bengal's landholding class, upper caste Bengali Hindus also monopolized professional positions in the colonial government, thereby provoking further resentment among Bengal's Muslim majority. As these elitist visions of Hindu and Muslim pasts clashed during both the Bengal Renaissance and the immediate aftermath of the First Partition, the evolution of Bengali Hindu and Muslim identity diverged to appear oppositional both socially and politically.

Elite conceptions of Hindu and Muslim identity continued to influence Bengali politics in the following decades. Demographically, Muslims constituted a clear majority in the Eastern districts, for reasons presented earlier in this chapter. Influenced by the rising force of a pan-Indian Muslim nationalism that was propounded by their coreligionists in North Indian cities such as Delhi, Agra, and Lucknow, many members of Bengal's Muslim aristocracy re-fashioned themselves as descendants of the Persian and Central Asian conquerors who had set the seeds for Islamic rule in India (Van Schendel 83). Troubled by what they perceived was a British-Hindu alliance that was working against Indian Muslim interests, this group's fears were reconfirmed by the British decision to reverse the First Partition. They attributed their political weakness to

what they believed was their adherence of an Islam that was tainted by its contact with Bengali culture. Hindu-Muslim syncretic traditions which distinguished Bengali Islam were dubbed by this class as theological stains that needed to be sanitized (Feldman 10). To revise their current circumstances, this demographic of the Bengali Muslim population collaborated with similar interest groups from other parts of India to establish the All India Muslim League at a convention held in Dhaka in 1906 (Van Schendel 83). By channeling some of these grievances towards their political ambitions, the Muslim League succeeded to garner support from poorer Bengali Muslims for the Pakistan project in subsequent decades. This dissonance between Hindu and Muslim national aspirations was actualized with the onset of extensive rioting in Kolkata in August 1946 that resulted in nearly four thousand deaths (Roy 31). The events of the "Great Calcutta Killing" were succeeded by similarly violent riots in other areas of India during the coming months. The extremely fierce experience of these confrontations contributed towards polarizing Hindu and Muslim identities and spaces. Many neighborhoods and localities in Bengal's cities and villages that had once been integrated developed communally segregated Hindu and Muslim *para*s (quarters). This sort of separation presented the prospect of a Second Partition as a viable solution to Bengal's sectarian malaise. In the next year, while the Bengal branch of the Muslim League called for the entire province to be awarded to Pakistan, Hindu nationalists agitated for a Partition. As the British withdrew from its Indian colony, it left the subcontinent divided both geographically but also socially on its Eastern and Western borders.

The new Pakistani government was brutally repressive of its Eastern wing's population. Elite renaissance-era conceptions of the Bengali identity as intrinsically opposed to a Muslim one were brought to forefront in March 1948 when Pakistan's first governor-general Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared Urdu as the nation's national language in a public gathering at Dhaka

University. The reason for this choice was Jinnah's belief that Urdu, above all other provincial languages, "represented the best that is in Islamic culture and tradition…(and that it was) nearest to the languages used in other Islamic countries" (Uddin 3). As they saw their linguistic heritage being declared inauthentic, if not treasonous, on February 21, 1952 many of Bengal's Muslims organized a peaceful public protest march against Pakistan's language laws. The Pakistani army opened fire on the protestors and killed several in the process. Although the Pakistani government reversed its policy and granted Bengali "official" status in 1956, the seeds of distrust between Pakistan's Western and Eastern wings had been planted. This mistrust only deepened in future years when, following its war with India in 1965, the Pakistani state temporarily banned the singing of *Rabindra Sangeet*, the canon of songs composed by Bengal's—and India's—Nobel-laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore on the radio, with the charge that the musical genre promoted anti-national sentiments among Pakistan's Bengalis (Tazreen).

The East's cultural grievances against the West were exacerbated by what they saw as a political and economic abuse of their land by the (West) Pakistani state. Despite its heavy contributions to the nation's economy, socio-economic progress in East Pakistan was significantly slower in comparison to the developments experienced in the West. In response to this exploitative situation, parties like Sheikh Mujib's Awami League agitated against the state to provide increased political autonomy to Pakistan's Bengali region. The Awami League contested Bengal's seats in the 1971 Pakistani general elections and Sheikh Mujib emerged as victorious, thereby challenging Western Wing hegemony over the Pakistani nation-state. However, political power in Pakistan was centred in the West Pakistani capital of Islamabad and monopolized by army generals of predominantly Punjabi ethnicity. These factors provided the context for the first strikes carried out by the Pakistani army that provoked the Bangladesh Liberation War.

To provide deeper perspective, I turn now to an ethnographic reflection based on the testimony of Dileep Karmaker, a Hindu Bangladeshi Canadian immigrant, as an exemplary account of how Bengali regional and national formations are understood by those who were at the center of the key events in 1971. As this and further interlocutor testimonies will demonstrate, these historical grievances between Hindus and Muslims remain powerful in Bangladesh and therefore contribute to the state's ongoing marginalization of the Hindu minority. Consequently, this sets the stage for the community's migration to Montreal, where their experience of non-belonging in the national context of Bangladesh is perpetuated in novel ways.

*Dileep's Testimony: 20th Century Religious Identity Politics in Bengal*

On the night prior to the historic radio announcement of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, sixteen-year old Dileep Karmaker was at the house of a friend in Dhaka's Old City playing a game of cards with his comrades who were from Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and (like Dileep was) Hindu families.[20] At the time, Dileep was a student member of a left-leaning organization advocating for the rights of laborers working at the docks of the East Pakistani capital. Little did he realize that in a few minutes, he would hear gunshots and the sounds of men and women screaming as the Pakistan army launched the preliminary movements of "Operation Searchlight." An offensive military strike which lasted almost two months, the operation sought to exterminate the Bengali nationalist movement that had been brewing in Pakistan's Eastern wing ever since its formation almost twenty-five years before. Dileep's family was deeply committed to their land and culture. Threatened at the prospect of living in a nation that was created for British India's

[20]As readers may remember from the *Introduction*, Dileep is a prominent community activist in the Hindu Bangladeshi diaspora.

Muslim population, most of Dileep's uncles and aunts migrated to Indian-administered West Bengal shortly after the formation of East Pakistan. Dileep's own father however was adamant about remaining in the village his ancestors had lived in for several generations. Other than his deep-seated love for his *mati* (soil), Dileep's father had been assigned the responsibility of taking care of his family's private cremation grounds. Each evening, the elder Karmaker would visit the plot and light candles for his ancestors' spirits. As several Hindu villages in the district were emptying out in the 1950s and 1960s following communal violence and state policy which was increasingly weary of East Pakistan's Hindus, this ritual connected Dileep's father to a personal past which his country was slowly dissociating itself from.

Dileep witnessed various changes occur in community life among East Pakistan's Hindus. As a young child, he believed that all his neighbors were part of his family. This belief did not discriminate between people of different caste or religious backgrounds. However, as he grew older, the fact that his father kept five separate *hookahs* for Brahmins, Baidyas, Kayasths, Namasudras, and Muslims taught him that caste discrimination was a powerful social reality that everyone around him was not only conscious of but also sustained. As individuals in the village that he referred to as *Kaka* (Uncle), *Maashi* (Aunty), and *Dada* (Brother) disappeared overnight, abandoning their homes on their way to India, Dileep was made increasingly aware of his status as a religious minority in the country. Additionally, when his Muslim classmates had their Islamic history class, Dileep and the village school's other Hindu students were sent to a separate room where they were taught basic Sanskrit, and mantras from various Hindu scriptures. Noticing that religion was a source of strife and division in his country, Dileep rejected the models of a religious-based nationalism that his elders had subscribed to. These models, he felt,

divided him from his peers and neighbors and as an adolescent, he came to identify more with the left-leaning, secular ideals that guided the Bengali nationalist movement.

Following the fateful events on the night of March 25, 1971, Dileep's world was turned upside down as he joined the fighters of the *Mukti Bahini.* A guerilla resistance movement that was set up immediately after Operation Searchlight to combat Pakistani aggression, the group consisted of Bengalis and non-Bengalis from military and civilian backgrounds. For nine long months, Dileep's life was in great danger because of his status as both a freedom fighter and a Hindu. Along with the "ungodly secularists who promoted regional autonomy", East Pakistan's Hindus were singled out by the Islamabad-based government propaganda as the "enemy within" who were conspiring with their Indian co-religionists, "the enemy without", to destroy Pakistan's national unity (Feldman 2). Pakistani soldiers were ordered to shoot Hindus on sight and "dispatch them to Bangladesh"--- the army's euphemism for summary execution (Van Schendel 162). In fact, the morning after the first military assault revealed that the homes in Shankhari Bazar, the neighborhood of Hindu conch shell-makers in *Puraan Dhaka*, were abandoned, with most of its inhabitants murdered.

For the duration of the Liberation War, Dileep evaded being intercepted by either Pakistani soldiers or *razakars*, their local Bengali collaborators, by shuttling between Mukti Bahini training sites in the mangrove forests on the Indian border, Dhaka, and his hometown in the district of Barisal. He disguised himself as a Muslim by adopting an Arabic name, growing out a thick beard, and by memorizing the five different Islamic *kalimas* if he was to ever encounter a situation where his religious identity would be called into question. He once was almost arrested by the military, but an Urdu-speaking navy officer whom he knew from the days when he worked with laborers at the docks came to his rescue. During this time, he had no

contact with his parents and siblings. He suspected that they, along with ten million or so other Bengalis, had fled across the border to refugee camps in India.[21] According to Indian government estimates, almost ninety percent of these refugees were Hindu (Bass 121).

Dileep remembers seeing the Buriganga River, the water that flows on the outskirts of Dhaka city, turn red as the army dumped the corpses of hundreds and thousands of Bengalis in its waters. He also knew women who were kidnapped and imprisoned in the army's cantonments, where they were forced into sexual slavery. According to many estimates, almost two hundred thousand women suffered rape or sexual slavery at the hands of the military and razakar forces (Mookherjee 436). After the war, the government referred to the female survivors this ordeal as *birangonas* (war heroines) in an attempt to circumvent their social ostracization. This move was premised on the need to help them re-integrate into everyday life by either getting married or by being able to enter the new nation's labor force (Mookherjee 436). Mookherjee notes that the nascent Bangladeshi state used the eulogization of the birangonas to buttress its post-Muslim credentials. In official publications which detailed measures taken by the government to reintegrate women victims of the war, the need for such rehabilitation was justified to ensure that Bangladesh emerge and develop "out of the traditions and taboos of Muslim society" (Mookherjee 436). However, in Dileep's view, this policy was unsuccessful. Rather, many of his acquaintances were victimized during the war and then rejected by their families when they attempted to return home. While many committed suicide, some of them converted to Islam and tried to assimilate into the religious mainstream, which came to dominate the country in later years.

[21] After the war, he learned that his family remained in East Pakistan, but like him, stayed in hiding in jungles and in fields across the country. Some of his cousins had been killed in his village.

When the Pakistani army finally surrendered to the Indian forces, Dileep was hiding at a Mukti Bahini training camp in Khulna district. While he and his comrades rarely received news from the outside world, as the war was raging, he recalls that the Indian army dropped leaflets from helicopters across the country urging all combatants to give up their weapons and to stop fighting in the days prior to the Pakistani surrender. He celebrated *Bijoya Dibosh* (Victory Day), along with his pals in the forest as they caught a signal announcing the birth of Bangladesh over the radio. More than forty-five years later, as he recounted his memories of 1971 during our interview at his home beside the MSDT, Dileep Babu made an insightful comment regarding his experiences during the War. While serious tensions had clearly been brewing between Islamabad and the Bengali nationalists, the conflict's Bengali participants were surprised to be faced with a Pakistani attack that was so brutal and terrorizing. Similarly, few combatants expected that the war would end after just nine months, and that it would conclude with the emergence of a Bengali nation-state. Van Schendel observes that "in 1930, not even the boldest visionary could have imagined it (the founding of Bangladesh), and by 1950 it was merely a gleam in the eyes of a few activists" (Van Schendel xxv). Nevertheless, the East Bengalis successfully established a Bengali nation in the 1970s that counted Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and other religious minorities as its citizens. Now that its existence was a fact, what kinds of historical narratives would the new state choose to bridge the religious divides which separated some of its inhabitants? To conclude this chapter, I now turn to a recent event from Bangladesh (2017) to illustrate how debates about religious identity continues to impact members of the transnational Hindu Bangladeshi community in Montreal.

*"I did not go to war for this Bangladesh": Contesting Bangladeshi Nationalisms in 2017*

A study of a major current event from early 2017 indicates the narratives of nation building that Bangladeshi state has chosen. Shortly after midnight on the 25th of May 2017, a live video, shot in front of the Dhaka Supreme Court, emerged on the Facebook pages of many Bangladeshi secular activists. The video, which was quickly picked up and screened on television sets by several news channels, showed a dozen or so men, some with hammers and chisels in their hands, at the bottom of a statue (Figure 3) erected late the previous year by the Bangladesh government in front of the capital city's Supreme Court Building, to resemble Themis, an ancient Greek Goddess believed to personify justice (Dhaka Tribune).[22] Within four hours of their arrival, the men detached the statue's feet from the ground and had a crane lift and lay it down on a blue pickup truck which drove out of the Court complex's main gates and disappeared slowly from the frames of the TV cameras that were present on site (Tribune Desk).

[22] While displaying iconographic features that are typically associated with Themis icons such as eyes shielded by a cloth and its holding the scales of justice, Lady Justice, as its creators named the image, was differentiated from her Greek antecedent by the sari draped around her torso and a sword placed in her right hand. In my interpretation, these additional features may have implicitly sought to connect her with the Goddess Durga who is popular amongst Bengal's Hindus. They were added by chief sculptor Mrinal Haque to reiterate to Bangladeshi citizens that "there is nothing Greek about it (the statue)…this is a Bangalee woman wearing a saree…(who is) nothing but a symbol of justice" (Tribune Desk).

Figure 3: Lady Justice before the Bangladesh Supreme Court (Tribune Desk)

As this incident unfolded before the world's eyes, two strains of opinions dominated official Bangladeshi reactions to the removal of the statue from the Supreme Court premises. Sculptor Mrinal Haque, who had both conceived and constructed the figure, appeared before journalists at 1:30 am to say: "This is a slap in the face of the progressive people in this country" (Tribune Desk). On the other hand, Ansarul Haque Imran, a civilian supporter of a Bangladeshi Islamist party, used his Facebook profile to post a statement on behalf of his party's Vice Chairman Maulana Abul Hasnat Amini that thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for removing the *murti* from the Supreme Court premises.[23] The reaction of Islamist parties bears an eerie resemblance

[23] Bangladeshi Islamist groups, most notable of which is the Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI) party, first called for the removal of the statue in February 2017. A spokesperson from its branch in Bangladesh's Narayanganj district declared that "You can establish however many idols at the different temples in Bangladesh, but we will not tolerate the presence of an idol in front of the highest court in the country." (Dhaka Tribune) On Valentine's Day 2017, a group of HeI

to statements issued in 2004 by Mr. Delwar Hossein Sayedee.[24] Sayedee was a prominent leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Bangladesh's largest Islamist party which, from 2001 until 2006, was a coalition partner of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the ruling political party of the period.[25] In the presence of several Bangladeshi parliamentarians at a religious gathering near Dhaka, Mr. Sayeedi declared that "all statues in Bangladesh except those worshipped by non-Muslims would be demolished…as statues were affront to the sentiments of Muslims in Bangladesh" (Riaz 3). Sayeedi's comments and the more recent removal of the Lady Justice portray worrying indications of the political climate in Bangladesh. Within this climate, the space accorded to secular idioms has receded and has been replaced with an acutely Islamist rhetoric.

A few of my Montreal-based interlocutors took to their Facebook pages to express their anguish at current trends in Bangladeshi politics. Shankar Debroy, the managing director at the

activists marched from *Baitul Mukarram*, Bangladesh's national mosque to the courthouse holding placards with slogans saying "Demolish the statue on the court premises and replace it with the Quran"(Dhaka Tribune). Others threatened violence by proclaiming "Remove the Greek idol at once from the Supreme Court premises. Please douse the smoldering fire in the hearts of the Muslims. Otherwise, the fire will soon catch you" (Dhaka Tribune). Bangladesh-based media outlets report that Sheikh Hasina "does not like the idol and would talk to the Chief Justice about removing it" (Tribune Desk). Although attacks on religious icons is a regular feature of inter-communal violence across South Asia, the attack on material symbols of state ideology in Bangladesh seems to have emerged in 2008 when eight workers from an Islamist party Anjuman-e-al-Baiyanat demolished a statue of Shah Lalon Fakir, a 19th century Baul mystic who is revered by many Bengali Hindus and Muslims alike (M. Karim).

[24] Often included in annual listings of the world's 500 most influential Muslims, Sayeedee was sentenced in life imprisonment in 2014 for his crimes against humanity, that he is alleged to have committed during the 1971 Liberation War. Some of the charges upon which he was indicted included genocide, mass murder, rape and arson (Habib).

[25] The Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party is the successor of the former East Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami party. First formed in Lahore in the year 1941 as Jamaat-e-Islami by Muslim theologian Syed Abul A'la Maududi (1903-79), the party was split into Indian and two Pakistani branches following the 1947 Partition of British India. Opposed to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the party was banned by the Bangladesh government in 1973, only to be restored in the early 1980s. In the subsequent decade, it rose as a significant political force with the capacity to help Bangladesh's two main political parties either achieve or lose power (Riaz 5–7). Many of its leaders and lower-ranking party workers have been accused of participating in atrocities against minority groups including Bangladeshi Hindus both during and after the 1971 war. For six months after the general election of October 2001 where they, as coalition partners emerged victorious, religious minorities, especially Bangladeshi Hindus faced widespread violence in various parts of the country (Riaz 3).

Canada-Bangladesh News Agency (CBNA), posted a status that read: “Sorry, this is not the Bangladesh that we dreamed about in 1971”. Dileep Karmaker posted, “I did not go to war for this sort of Bangladesh. I am ashamed, shocked, and angry”.[26] In the introduction to this chapter, an allusion was made to the fact that Bangladesh’s founding fathers established their nation on a model that favored ethnicity over religion. However, as both the Facebook posts by Shankar and Dileep-babu and the statements by Islamist activists seem to suggest, growing numbers of Hindu Bangladeshis have come to feel disillusioned by the assurances promised by the state in 1971.

In this example, where an artifact linking the nation to a culture other than an Islamicate one was removed from the public domain, Bangladesh’s Islamists and their agents in government struggle against an opposing faction, which Mrinal Haque dubs “the progressive voices of this country”, to monopolize access to what I call the state’s narrative-making machines. These machines, which produce official history curricula and re-invent specific objects and sites as *lieu de mémoire* (Nora), reinforce public understandings of how the national collective was first envisaged. As they gradually succeed in their efforts to establish their partisan interpretations as both authoritative and normative, Bangladeshi Islamists actively contest and exclude the non-confessional models of nationhood, which my interlocutors remember being assured of in 1971. Globally, the Bangladeshi case has features that are common with other public contestations of national memory in the greater South Asian region. Indian politics, for example, is being increasingly dominated by political parties of the right-wing *Sangh Parivar* clique, one of which, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), was elected to power in 2014. Like Bangladesh-based Islamists, the Sangh Parivar employs only those symbols that define and reinforce an upper-

[26] The original post, in Bengali, reads as follows: আমি এমন বাংলাদেশের জন্য মুক্তিযুদ্ধ করিনি। আমি লজ্জিত, মর্মাহত, ক্ষুব্ধ.

caste, Hindu vision of India's past, thereby either intentionally excluding Islamicate contributions from collective memory or constructing them as being inherently alien to Indian civilization (Uddin 5). In September 2015, for example, it successfully petitioned the government to rename New Delhi's Aurangzeb Road, named after the 17th century Mughal Emperor of the same name, as the Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Road in memory of the former Indian president, a Muslim who was on good terms with many of the Sangh Parivar's ideologues (Sharma). Similarly, the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Afghan Taliban can also be interpreted as an instance of a majoritarian re-writing of history that re-defines the nation as an exclusive club, and casts only certain kinds of individuals as both eligible and ideal for citizenship-membership.

Jones draws the following set of theoretical conclusions to make meaning of the happenings detailed in the previous paragraph. Fundamental to any nationalist claim, Jones insists, is the process by which an identity category is linked to a counterpart territory. Following germinal studies on nationalism such as Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', Jones writes that the desired outcome of these processes is the establishment of symbolic connections "between an imagined community of people and a piece of land" (Jones 376). These connections sacralize the land as the place from which a group emerged and the place to which that group belongs. They also simultaneously reify the nation and convey upon it the properties of stability, and both spatial and temporal permanence.

Anderson's primary arguments challenge notions that take the nation as a natural outcome of social conditions. Instead, he argues that the idea of a nation as a primordial form of social organization is imagined into existence once nationalists actualize a sense of cultural homogeneity among its individual members. To impose such cultural homogeneity, he writes,

the national community must be made from a set of individuals who, apart from sharing the same memories of glorious pasts, are also connected by virtue of "having forgotten lots of things".[27] (Anderson 6) Forging cultural homogeneity based on the simultaneous acts of remembering and forgetting leads to what scholar Eric Hobsbawm terms "the invention of traditions" which tie together communities (often those of which the territory's elite communities are a part) to the pieces of land (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1). The process of such invention necessitates projecting carefully selected localized practices as being representative of all communities inhabiting a physical space that constitutes a nation. The role an individual is assigned in this dyad of historical memory and historical amnesia effectively decides their positions as members of majority or minority communities within the nationalist's nation. In my next chapter, I follow up on this proposition through outlining the lived experiences of important Hindu Bangladeshi personalities in the Montreal diaspora. Their experiences of life in their former homeland, and their journeys to Montreal provide valuable insights regarding the ways in which Bangladesh's religious minorities have responded to shifting definitions of Bangladeshi national identity.

[27] Anderson himself quotes the work of 19th century French historian Ernest Renan as he writes this quote. The original, in French reads as follows: *Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.*

# Chapter Two: Shifting Homelands–Creating Bangladeshi Contexts in Montreal

## *Understanding Caste in Hindu Bangladeshi Montreal*

The presence of a separate Hindu Bangladeshi community in Montreal can be traced to the early 1980s when small groups of single men arrived at the city's Mirabel airport and petitioned to Canadian authorities for political asylum. While some of these men boarded their Montreal-bound planes directly in Bangladeshi cities, others, like Manu Da, the late Mr. A. B. Chowdhury and Ritish Chakraborty landed in the city after spending time in other countries perceived as less receptive to South Asian asylum-seekers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. While the individual stories that triggered their migrations vary, all of them were driven to leave their homeland in response to political crises that erupted across Bangladesh following the brutal assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and several members of his family in the early hours of August 15, 1975. The extent of these crises only worsened in the 1980s following a second politically-motivated killing in 1981, that of Sheikh Mujib's most prominent successor and perceived rival Ziaur Rahman. Along with Sheikh Mujib, Ziaur Rahman was amongst the two most important founding ideologues of statist- and nationalist thought in post-Independence Bangladesh. The two murders fostered a rapid breakdown of the nation's law-and-order systems. The deterioration of these structures permitted the re-emergence of sectarian cleavages, and inter-religious conflicts, that were supposedly defeated during the Liberation War. In their reappearance, these tensions manifested themselves in ways throughout the ensuing thirty or so years that, in Dileep Karmaker's view (see Chapter One), were far more anxiety-provoking and dangerous for the country's non-Muslims than those during the worst moments under the East Pakistani regime.

Members of Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi diaspora belong primarily to lower middle and middle-class family backgrounds with roots in smaller-sized towns and villages from various districts in their home country. Although I have met men and women from many different castes in the eight years of my interactions, most people I have come across have surnames that indicate a *Kayastha* affiliation. When I asked a couple of my interlocutors about their views on the caste system, and more specifically how it influenced relations between Hindus in Bangladesh, many said that while caste-based orthodoxy continued to remain relevant in mainly religious contexts, they did believe that Hindu society in Bangladesh was slowly transitioning towards a post-caste era. They believed this to be particularly true in urban areas of their country. A major cause of this transition is the changing demographic realities that Hindus face today in Bangladesh. Because of the community's shrinking numbers amid the rise of majoritarian politics, many Bangladeshi Hindus believe that they must forego an orthodox adherence to caste laws in order to remain politically powerful and as one interlocutor, who prefers to remain anonymous, chose to describe it, to "survive". For example, in a phone conversation from 2015, Manu Da, who comes from a Kayastha family, once declared to me that he had several Brahmin relatives. His statement is corroborated by the experience of Jhumur Di, another of my interlocutors who visits the MSDT on essential functions.

Born in the mid-1960s to Brahmin parents whose surname was Chakraborty, Jhumur Di remembers that while their identity as Hindus was always important to her family, she was always encouraged to challenged caste-based laws that actively promoted what she called "extremist views". Friends from diverse caste and religious backgrounds were always welcome to share meals at her family home near Dhaka's Ramakrishna Mission, where they were equally invited to witness the *nitya* (daily) puja that her mother performed, a family tradition that she

continues to follow. Moreover, Jhumur Di's parents taught her to offer *pronam* (reverential bow) to anyone significantly elder to her, irrespective of their religious, caste, or economic position. In imparting this instruction, Jhumur Di's parents guided their children to eschew received rules by which Brahmins would offer *pronam* only to elder members of the Brahmin community. When her brothers arranged her marriage in 1992, they selected a man from a Kayastha family with the surname Sarkar. She moved to Montreal soon after her marriage because Mr. Sarkar had migrated to Canada ten years ago. When I asked her if the caste difference between her prospective spouse and herself ever bothered her siblings, she replied that their indifference to the issue was a sign of the progressive values her parents transmitted to their children. After years of marital discord, Jhumur Di divorced her husband and today makes a living as a barista at a Tim Horton's franchise at the intersection of the Henri-Bourassa and Sherbrooke streets. Despite the economic vulnerabilities that she faces as a single woman, Jhumur Di happily proclaimed that her Hindu Bangladeshi compatriots have supported her during her most challenging moments and have never let her feel like a lesser person after her divorce. As an example of their solidarity with her struggles, she cited several instances when ladies at the MSDT invited her to participate in rituals that are restricted to *Sumongoli* (married) women.

Notwithstanding such encouraging indications of the emergence of post-caste society put forward such interlocutors, in my encounters with men and women at the MSDT over the years, I include the experience of being welcomed by certain individuals in the community principally upon the fact that my own surname, Bhattacharjee, is unambiguously Brahmin. In other instances, community members, upon learning my caste status have made comments acknowledging that they were addressing me as a Brahmin. As such, it is important to acknowledge the continued centrality of caste alongside the accounts of individuals like Manu

Da and Jhumur Di, which attest to the transitions of caste and gender-related strictures in the community.

*Sylhet, its History—and Shah Jalal, its Saint*

Most Bangladeshi Hindu and Muslim Montrealers identify their *adi-baris* (native places) as part of Bangladesh's Sylhet Division.[28] It is therefore crucial to understand the Bangladeshi diaspora through reference to Sylhetis—who are ubiquitous to almost all Bengali communities worldwide—and to Sylhet's history for its striking contrasts from other regional Bengali histories.[29] Points that distinguish Sylhet from other regions of Bengal include its unique experience under British colonialism, distance from pre-eminent urban centers like Kolkata and Dhaka, and its regional importance to an Islamist interpretation of Bengal-Bangladesh history. Located in the northeastern Bangladesh, the Sylhet area and its namesake capital city border India's Northeastern states (Figure 4).

[28] It is, as of now, impossible to verify this conclusion with a reference to the statistics released by Statistics Canada. For more information, please refer to this thesis's introduction.

[29] It is important to draw a distinction between the Bangladeshi diaspora in the Arab world, where most overseas Bangladeshis live, and that in the West (Kapiszewski 10). While Bangladeshi migrants to the Middle East have roots in diverse Bangladeshi districts, Bangladeshi migration to the West is overwhelmingly led by Sylhetis.

Figure 4: Map of Bangladesh—Sylhet (Mannan)

Its topographic makeup includes hills that contain South Asia's oldest tea estates, some of Bangladesh's largest lakes, and a set of marshy ecosystems that are distinct to the region called *haors.* Thus, its terrain and climate have more in common with Indian states like Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. In the first millennium CE, Sylhet was ruled by the ancient Assamese and Bengali kingdoms of Harikhela and Kamarupa. Its political ties to Northeast India were temporarily severed in the 14th century when Shamsuddin Firoz Shah conquered the region. Shah, a general in the Sultan of Delhi's army, introduced Islam to the area and established an independent kingdom that was chiefly administered by resident chieftains who were both Hindu and Muslim. From then until the early seventeenth century, when it was occupied by the

Mughals, Sylhet was part of Bhati region, a satellite state of the Bengal Sultanate which contemporary scholars locate in today's Northeast Bangladesh. By studying official Mughal-era records, Eaton posits that Sylhet was among the few districts in Bengal's Eastern half whose marshes and forestlands were transformed into farmland. This was mainly done by Muslim cultivators from the West who made the territory agriculturally very productive (Eaton 194).

According to an anonymous narrative recounted to me by a Bangladeshi Muslim classmate, Sylhet's ruler Shamsuddin Firoz Shah was aided by a non-Indian Sufi, Shah Jalal, and by his 360 companions who camped on the banks of the Surma River and cooked a dish where beef was the primary ingredient. By divine providence, the winds drew the smell of the cooked beef to the noses of Hindus in the capital city, who converted to Islam on the spot because their senses had been contaminated by a polluting meat substance. Despite its apocryphal nature, the narrative itself is important for our purpose of identifying the kinds of stories that continue to be conjured up by Bengalis to stress differences between Hindus and Muslims. A variant of this tale is mentioned in the *Suhail-e-Yaman*, an 1860 Persian-language biography of Shah Jalal, in which he was called upon by a Sufi mystic in Sylhet to seek vengeance against a Hindu raja who had killed the latter's son because his father had secretly slaughtered a cow (M. M. Khan 25). Unlike content in earlier biographies, which identified Shah Jalal as a Turk, the *Suhail-e-Yaman* identifies him as a Yemenite Arab. This crucial difference is indicative of changing identity politics in the 19$^{th}$ century where, as discussed in Chapter One, the Muslim *ashraf* classes sought to increasingly claim Middle Eastern over Central and South Asian roots for itself. Shah Jalal remains very relevant to the Bangladeshi national narrative and his name is enshrined in the names of various mosques and state institutions. His tomb, locally referred to as either a *mazhar* or *dargah*, is a very popular destination among Muslim Bangladeshis. Until the 1980s, Hindus

were also frequent visitors at the shrine. Up until then, memories of Shah Jalal as a vanquisher of Sylhet's Hindus seem to have been forgotten by the population, thereby indicating the relative fluidity of Hindu and Muslim identities in the early Bangladeshi nation. When I asked one of my interlocutors who had once lived in Bangladesh whether he, or other Hindu visitors to the site, were aware of Shah Jalal's legendary use of beef to convert the area's Hindus, he replied by saying "No…then, most of us had no idea of his such activities". However, in face of an increased polarization of sectarian identities in modern-day Bangladesh, he acknowledged that fewer Hindus visit the mazhar than they did in the past.

In Bangladesh's 2008 general elections, the Awami League (AL) defeated its traditional rival, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and was elected to power. One of the first moves of the new government was to rename Dhaka's International Airport as the Hazrat Shah Jalal International Airport. From 1983 until then, the airport had been called Zia International Airport in commemoration of the recently assassinated founder of the BNP, Ziaur Rahman. Given that the present Bangladeshi opposition is headed by Rahman's widow Begum Khaleda Zia, one can interpret the AL's decision as a strategic maneuver to both satisfy party hardliners who wish to minimize the BNP's contributions to the nation and to select a national symbol that unites the state's warring political factions. What remains to be discussed, however, are the ideological implications of this action with regards to the government's policies towards religious minorities. In his extremely influential piece *'God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh'*, Ali Riaz argues that despite very fierce Hindu-Muslim-led resistance to these trends, it is impossible to deny the growing tolerance and acceptance of Islamist-sponsored readings of Islam by a significant section of Bangladesh's civilian population. Islamist successes in influencing common perspectives toward religion in everyday Bangladeshi life, Riaz claims, are most

noticeable in conservative attitudes to dress codes, literary censure, and sensibilities about suitable female behavior, all of which are being increasingly naturalized (Riaz 11). Specific examples of these processes will be referred to later in this chapter, as I incorporate more testimonies from my interlocutors, some of whom have not lived in the old country for decades, The Bangladeshi state's appropriation of the Sylheti Shah Jalal, I argue, must be regarded as a step in this state-driven push towards social conservatism. Other than what can be viewed as an attempt to integrate a region whose historical trajectory has hitherto been dissimilar from the rest of the country, the Bangladeshi government, in its choice to name the international airport after a historical figure who is celebrated by Bangladesh's majority popularity for defiling a popular marker of Hindu identity, chooses to essentialize a Muslim history as part of the nation's foundational narratives. This propelling of the Sylheti saint to the national platform must also be regarded as a useful strategy by the Bangladeshi mainstream to exclude Hindu memories of the past from public discourse.

The inhabitants of Sylhet, both its Hindu minority and the Muslims who constituted the area's majority, were distinguished as unambiguously Bengali during Mughal times. In the 1700s a frontier was drawn between lands that belonged to the Nawab of Bengal and those which belonged to chieftains from the mountain-based Khasi and Garo ethnicities who the Nawab was unable to subdue (Hussain 7). This separation and the uncontested Bengali-ness of the Sylheti people was reversed in 1874 when the British incorporated Sylhet into Assam following their discovery of tea gardens in both provinces, despite linguistic and religious differences between Assamese and Sylhetis. Sylhetis overwhelmingly voted for Pakistan in the 1947 Partition and thus, most of the region (apart from the Karimganj district where most residents voted for India), was amalgamated into East Pakistan. Sylhet did not witness the violent riots of the same scale as

those that gripped other parts of South Asia at the time, thereby suggesting why many Sylheti Hindus chose to remain in East Pakistan. The migration of Hindus from Sylhet to India occurred gradually over the forthcoming years, and when it did happen, most Sylheti Hindus chose to re-settle in Indian states like Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura over West Bengal. The region was however, the site of several violent battles between Bengalis and the West Pakistani army during the Liberation War, when the Mukti Bahini launched its first operations from Sylhet's Habiganj district. Hence, the birth of Bangladesh is closely identified with the absorption of the Sylhetis into the Bengali nation. As Sylhetis tower over other members of the Bangladeshi diaspora, their history and their relationship to the idea of Bengal must be considered in our current investigation of what distinguishes the MSDT from other Hindu Bengali groups and religious spaces.

*Sylhet: A remembered homeland*

The Sylheti presence at the MSDT is very visible where the sound of their distinctive dialect, as articulated in its priest's speeches at community pujas, falls on the ears of visitors who enter the temple space.[30] Furthermore, domestic Hindu rituals that are typical to only Sylhetis,

[30] Perhaps because of its distinguishing colonial-era experience, the Sylheti dialect does indeed sound different from standard Bengali to both trained and untrained ears. Its status as either a Bengali dialect or as a distinct language is a keenly-debated subject, in academic discussions and parochial conversations during Bengali *adda* sessions alike. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the London diaspora and his own survey of relevant literature on the matter, scholar Rod Chalmers determines that "Sylheti and standard Bangla are near enough mutually unintelligible" (Chalmers 6–7). His findings are contested by Sebastian Rasinger who, while conducting his own fieldwork among London-based Sylhetis, encountered interlocutors who contend that despite the two being somewhat different, Sylheti is ultimately a legitimate variant of standard Bengali with minor deviations in accent, vocabulary and pronunciation (Rasinger 26). Rasinger qualifies his claim by mentioning that his interlocutors were overwhelmingly individuals who received primary and secondary-level schooling in Bangladesh where standard Bengali was the main language of instruction. Over the course of my own fieldwork, I have observed that fluency in standard Bengali among Sylheti Montrealers is not just linked to being schooled in the standard register. It is also intimately connected with the individual's exposure to the performing arts genres of Robindro Songeet and Nazrul Geeti, advanced studies in Bengali literature, and close family ties to Bengalis in India. I have frequently come across Sylheti Hindu families in Montreal where the parents and grandparents are fluent speakers of what they call *shuddho* (pure) *Bangla*; these classifiers for the standard dialect reflect the process of linguistic standardization during the

such as the *Sabitri Broto* fast which married women observe as they offer prayers requesting long lives for their spouses, are publicly celebrated at the MSDT. Among the numerous reasons that Sylhetis outnumber Bangladeshis from other regions in Montreal, the following is most salient.[31] From the nineteenth century onwards, a sizeable number of Sylheti men worked for the British Merchant marine as *lascars* (seamen). Their profession enabled many of these young men to travel to London, where several jumped ship and eventually settled, establishing roots in working-class neighborhoods of the city's East End (Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 2).

A small Sylheti population was thus already present in London following the end of the Second World War. It increased dramatically during the 1950s when, faced by an increased need for factory labor to restore the nation's economy, post-war British governments encouraged migrants from their former colony to settle in industrialized, urban centers across the country (Rasinger 20). Although several barriers to migration from the Indian subcontinent were introduced by the British state in the 1970s, the overwhelming influx of Sylheti immigrants in the preceding years ensured that Britain's Bengali population grew from six thousand people in the late 1950s to a hundred and sixty two thousand almost thirty years later (Rasinger 20).

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Bengal Renaissance where the Kolkata dialect was re-invented as standardized Bengali. On the other hand, the Montreal-born children in these families often struggle to speak *shuddho Bangla* and prefer to speak in Sylheti. Given that my father's family also has roots in Sylhet's Habiganj district, I have noticed, based on my personal experience, the opposite trend among India-based Sylhetis. This is especially true for those to live away from Indian districts which border Sylhet such as those in Assam's Cachar region and the Tripura state. While my father, his parents, siblings and cousins tend to converse with each other in Sylheti, they actively discourage their children from doing the same. In fact, I have even heard an uncle tell his child to not speak Sylheti because he had educated them! The choice of dialect chosen by post-1971 Sylhetis reflects conscious decisions made by post-colonial Indian and Bangladeshi governments to privilege specific colonial-era ethnolinguistic identities over others. These decisions are inextricably associated with the religious undertones of the respective category.

[31] At an informal dinner party, Manu Da's wife Purobi Boudi proudly referred to the migratory tendencies of her Sylheti brethren, in contrast to those of other Bengalis, when she passed the following comment: "Our people (Sylhetis) have been coming abroad for so many years. These guys have only just started leaving the country!" (*Era to ekhunni bilete ashte shuru korse. Amra to bohudin dhore baire asi).*

Rasinger writes that the present-day British Sylheti population, over half of which is situated in London's East End, consists predominantly of people from richer to middle-income families, with significant land holdings in Bangladesh; the poorest Sylhetis commonly are unable to afford the costs associated with traveling to and re-settling overseas (Rasinger 20). In her ethnography on the same community, Katy Gardner observes that many of the first Sylheti migrants became very rich through their work in factories in the United Kingdom. Often, this section of the diaspora invested their earnings in purchasing land and property back in Sylhet, thereby transforming the economic positions and social statuses not only of their families, but of the province itself (Gardner 4). Gardner mentions the presence of several *Londoni Gaons* (Londoner villages) across rural Sylhet that have been made affluent through remittances sent by members of the London-based diaspora. Some of the amenities these villages boast of include large Western-style holiday homes, renovated mosques and temples, international schools, hospitals and high-end agricultural technology (Gardner 4–5). Residents in these villages, because of their access to the foreign wages of their relatives, tend to have a vastly increased purchasing power, which permits them to buy high-end material goods such as the latest television sets and phones. Moreover, the price of an acre of land in Sylhet is at least three to four times more expensive than it is in Bangladeshi regions that have fewer members who live abroad (Gardner 5). On account of these changes, for many Bangladeshis, especially those in Sylhet who have never migrated, migration has come to connote "a means to change a household's economic position and status in only a few years" (Gardner 4).

While London does figure prominently in the imaginations of Sylhetis who aspire to migrate, many also realize that the job market in the United Kingdom is no longer as welcoming of foreign labor as it was in the 1950s. Although Bangladeshis are inclined to perceive UK-based

Sylhetis as largely prosperous, Gardner writes that the British mainstream tends to portray what it calls "the Bangladeshi community" as an economically and socially disadvantaged population (Gardner 3). Unlike other British South Asians, she contends that "Bengalis in the UK tend to suffer from higher unemployment and greater dependence upon council accommodation" (Gardner 3). Unlike popular perceptions of British Gujaratis, Punjabis, and Mirpuris, she reports that British Bangladeshis tend to suffer from more negative social stereotypes. Her conclusions are supported by Jalais, Chatterji, and Alexander who, in the introduction to their 2011 book *'The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration'*, cite the UK's Bangladeshi Muslim community as the focus of concerns about segregation, social exclusion, and radicalization (Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 1). She postulates that the reasons behind this relatively underprivileged condition have their roots in the late 1960s, when British industry declined, thereby making work in factories increasingly difficult to come across. In response to the precariousness of this situation, British Bangladeshis overwhelmingly entered the Indian restaurant and catering industries, opening thousands of "Bengal Brasseries and Taj Mahal takeaways" in the 1970s (Gardner 3).

However, as readers will discover in forthcoming sections of this chapter, this industry also weakened in the coming decades, such that Sylheti newcomers to the UK have found it increasingly difficult to establish what newspapers today label Britain's "disappearing curry houses" (Telegraph Reporters). Faced with amplified challenges to settling in the UK, many Bangladeshis who saw political and sectarian tensions in their homeland explode in the 1980s looked to other nations as alternative host countries. In what follows, I will provide the in-depth testimonies of two prominent members from Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi diaspora who immigrated to Canada at two distinct moments in their community's formation. Additionally, I

will also explore the continuities and similarities between the community in Montreal and that in the UK. The first of these interlocutors is Bhanu *Mama* (Uncle Bhanu)—one of the eldest living pioneers of the Hindu Bangladeshi community since his arrival in Montreal in 1975. The story of Bhanu Mama's resettlement in Montreal will be followed by that of Sharmila *Boudi's* ("Sister-in-law" Sharmila), one of the first Hindu Bangladeshi women in the community who migrated in the early 1990s. The stories of both interlocutors offer salient insights into the community's early days in Montreal. Most importantly, I will pay special attention to the development of Bangladeshi-styled kinship bonds between individual members of this group. This treatment will consider the question of how families in diasporic settings function as institutions that produce hybridized identities among the men, women, and children who make up the transnational community. The framing of multiple identities among the diaspora's constituents empowers individuals like Bhanu Mama and Sharmila Boudi to create Bangladeshi contexts in Western cities like Montreal. By discussing this empowerment, I will, in this thesis's concluding chapter, study its impetus in the assembling of sites such as the MSDT. For now, I turn to the ethnographic testimony of Bhanu Mama for deeper perspective on this issue.

*Bhanu Mama's Testimony: From Sylhet and Tripura to London and Montreal*

When I began my fieldwork for this project, I asked all my interlocutors to recount their memories of the community's formation. Interlocutors who had migrated to Montreal more recently were requested to recall stories of the community's earliest moments from their friends and family members. Of the various people I had spoken to, almost all told me to seek out Bhanu Mama, who they believed was one of the pioneering members in the Montreal diaspora. I had met Bhanu Mama several times in the past at various pre-MSDT pujas, at the École Secondaire

Saint-Henri and at the MSDT itself. Furthermore, I also knew that Bhanu Mama was a devoted member of the Ramakrishna Mission, a Hindu organization that my father's family is involved with, and that he and his family frequently participated at the monthly *pathachakras* (prayer circles) that the Mission's Montreal chapter organized. Because of his elevated stature amongst both the city's Indian Bengalis and the Bangladeshis, I operated under the false assumption that he would be too busy to speak to me, and was thus initially hesitant to reach out to Bhanu Mama. Instead, I tried to learn as much as I could about him from my friend Puja, his youngest daughter, who is the same age as I am. When I brought up the subject of her father's life with her, Puja allayed my anxieties and encouraged me to get in touch with her *Baba* directly. She said that her father had helped people in need for as long as she could remember and would be more than happy to give me an interview. Puja remembers an endless stream of visitors coming in and out of her childhood home near Montreal's Charlevoix metro station. Many of these visitors would discuss the struggles in their businesses and personal lives and would request Bhanu Mama's help on these matters. A day rarely went by at her house where her family did not receive visitors for lunch or dinner. As she reminisced, she mentioned that her parents regularly asked her and her siblings to sleep on mattresses in the living room for a couple of nights and to give up their bedrooms to families that had freshly arrived in Montreal from Bangladesh, requested political asylum, and had just been released from detention at the airport. Puja's accounts were confirmed to me by several community members, including Sharmila Boudi whose interview will be addressed next. When her husband, Mr. Dipak Dhar (Apu Da) contemplated emigrating to Canada in 1983, he was advised by his friends in Sylhet Town to ring a Montreal-based restaurateur named Bhanu Da, who had a reputation for helping Bengali asylum seekers, once he landed at the Mirabel Airport.

With my unease alleviated, I rang up Bhanu Mama, reminded him of who I was, and broached the subject of an interview with him. He placed me immediately and quickly transitioned from the formal second person Bengali pronoun *apni* to the more informal *tumi*, which to me indicated a sincere desire to help someone he considered a child of the community. He was, at the outset, surprised to receive a request to be interviewed for a thesis in Religious Studies, for as he said, he was not a cleric. Instead, he recommended that I look up Youtube lectures on *Advaita Vedanta* delivered by eminent *Swamijis* (monastics) of the Ramakrishna Mission. Silently chuckling at the suggestion, yet at the same time grateful for the well-intentioned thought, I re-explained the purpose of my study and asked if he would be open to having a conversation regarding his life and journey from Bangladesh to Montreal. He listened patiently and extended a lunch invitation to me, along with agreeing to participate in my study. I visited him at the childhood home described by Puja, and was treated to a delicious Sylheti meal prepared by his wife. We began our conversation after Bhanu Mama indulged me with a cup of garden-fresh tea that he prepared himself.

Bhanu Lal Dey Chowdhury was born in what he reckons[32] was 1946, a year before the Partition, in Sylhet's district town. He was among the youngest children born to a family that consisted of five sons and two daughters. His father was a zamindar, whose ancestral seat was in the Habiganj district, and who had vast landholdings across the province.

[32] I have chosen to use the verb 'reckon' because Bhanu Mama, like my father and many other Sylheti men and women from Sylhet and Assam who were born before the Partition did not solely rely on the Gregorian calendrical system to determine their birthdays. Many birthdays were at times remembered as per their occurrence in the Bengali calendar or on other occasions, with reference to major historical events. Furthermore, as my father explained this predicament to me, many of these babies were born at homes rather than at hospitals and "not everyone had parents who were particular about keeping accurate birthday records". When the postcolonial state obliged its citizens to register birth dates that conformed to the Gregorian calendar, many individuals, in the absence of official birth certificates, simply provided dates based on approximate reckonings of their ages and knowledge of their birthday in the Bengali calendar.

Although his personal memories from the time suggest a very idyllic and contented life, in fact as the years passed by his father grew increasingly anxious about living as a religious minority in East Pakistan. By the early 1950s, Bhanu Mama's father was confronted with political and social realities that were extremely different from those that he had known as recently as ten years previously. In what can be interpreted as a response to prevailing uncertainties, at some point in 1956 he traveled to the Indian High Commission at Dhaka, where he applied to migrate to India. Once their application was accepted, Bhanu Mama's parents bid an emotional farewell to their cousins, friends, and adult children, before finally moving. Once they entered India, they built a new life for themselves and their youngest children in Kailashahar, a small town located at the border of Sylhet and the Indian state of Tripura. In his recollection of those times, Bhanu Mama does not remember any specific incident that provoked his parents' decision to emigrate. As far as he can recall, his parents maintained close and friendly ties with the Muslim farmers who worked on their lands. In fact, some of these farmers chaperoned his family on the journey in their own cars from their home to the border checkpoint, where very tearful scenes of parting ensued. Yet, in hindsight, he thinks that his father may have sensed the nascent traces of distrust and preferred relinquishing his material inheritance over destroying human bonds forged and cultivated by his ancestors.

Bhanu Mama's family was minimally compensated by the Indian government for the wealth lost due to their dislocation. In comparison to the privileged existence that they led in Sylhet, their new settings were far more modest. As they struggled to reconcile themselves to these circumstances, Bhanu Mama and his siblings fostered dreams of restoring their family's former glories and re-constructing the wealth and comfort that they had to abandon back in East Pakistan. In 1957 and 1958, his two eldest brothers, who did not join their parents in Tripura,

followed the dozens of Sylheti men who were making their way to London. As his brothers struggled towards achieving their goals in the UK, Bhanu Mama's dreams were nurtured at school in Kailashahar. He resumed his primary school studies at a school that was run by monastics from the Ramakrishna Mission.[33] Most of his classmates were young boys and girls who, like him, were deeply affected by the losses and turmoil of the Partition. At their school, these students were taught to glean important life lessons from the hagiographical accounts of personal ordeals faced by Ramakrishna, his wife Sarada Debi, and chief disciple Swami Vivekananda.[34] As he grew older, Bhanu Mama received initiation (*diksha*) into the mission and participated in several of its activities. With help from some of the contacts he made at the Ramakrishna Mission, Bhanu Mama opened a series of small businesses in Kailashahar and the

[33] In Chapter 3 of 'The Nation and its Fragments', Partha Chatterjee writes extensively about the formation of Bengali middle-class identity in late 19th century Kolkata. In this chapter, he also considers the innovative contribution of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement towards constructing urban religiosities that addressed the social anxieties posed by novelty and middle-ness of this then unique societal category (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 36). While I am yet to come across academic writing that looks at the presence of the movement in post-Partition Assam and Tripura with much depth, I have learned through both the testimonies of individuals like Bhanu Mama and in conversations with my own family members who lived through the Partition that the Ramakrishna Mission was extremely useful in helping them feel integrated within their new national contexts. In a recent telephonic conversation with my father where we discussed the popularity of Ramakrishna Mission schools among his childhood peers, he mentioned that "even if our parents did not necessarily believe in the fact of Thakur's *avatar*-hood, they sent their children to Vivekananda Vidyalayas because it was a status symbol to do so. Eventually, many of us abandoned our *kulagurus* and became committed devotees of Ramakrishna Deb". If we interpret the social conditions faced by Sylhetis in Assam amid post-Partition times as being analogous to that of Kolkata's colonial middle class, we indeed understand the charm of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Movement for this population.

[34] Several scholars have urgently problematized the hagiographies of historical figures of the Ramakrishna Mission and rescue them from the procedures of legend and myth-making (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World : A Derivative Discourse?*; Shamita Basu; Kripal; Sil). In contrast, over the course of my field work, almost all the Hindu Bangladeshi men and women that I met expressed profound admiration for the Ramakrishna Mission and its activities. One of them, Mr. Nabendra Das (Naba Da) who is now in his mid-50s, stated that despite growing up in a regional context where his Muslim neighbors almost always passed disparaging comments about his faith and frequently insulted Hindus with the slur *Malaun* or *Malauner Bachha* (son of an infidel), a term that literally means 'They that are deprived of Allah's mercy', the fact that he was "a disciple of Swamiji (an emic term for Vivekananda)" ensured that his religious convictions never wavered. He was introduced to the Ramakrishna Mission at its centre in Sylhet's Sunamganj district and is today Vice-President at its Montreal chapter. As the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement has been such a positive and life-saving force for many of interlocutors, I hope that this thesis might encourage further scholarship on present-day associations between the Ramakrishna Mission and Bangladeshi Hindus in greater depth.

state capital of Agartala, from distributing medical goods to supplying various kinds of equipment to government officials. However, he quickly realized that the economic climate in Tripura during the late 1960s would not permit him to realize the visions he held of re-building his family's financial prestige.

After suffering financial losses in these enterprises, Bhanu Mama applied for a visitor's visa to Great Britain that would allow him to join his eldest brothers in London. He spent a year in London where he tried his hand at different odd jobs, and pursued a diploma in a subject that he believes was ill-suited for the life that he intended to lead. Despite the positive experience he had in London, he believed that the first successes witnessed by the pioneers of the city's Bengali community would not trickle down to immigrants like him who had arrived later. Therefore, he submitted his third visa application in 1973, and flew to the United States. He had lived for a year in the US when he visited Canada for the first time on the 8th of August 1974 (an important day in US history as the day that President Richard Nixon announced his resignation following the Watergate scandals). A Sylheti immigrant that he befriended while living in London advised Bhanu Mama to meet a nephew who had lived in Quebec since 1967. This nephew, whose name was Paul Babu, urged Bhanu Mama to move Montreal and to partner with him in opening a business in the newly-rising industry of Indian restaurants. Paul Babu convinced him by saying that since the Indian and Bengali communities in Montreal were much smaller than they were in London, the two of them would face less competition in establishing their ventures. Once the terms and conditions of their commercial partnership were agreed upon, Paul Babu sponsored Bhanu Mama's immigration application, one that was accepted in 1976.

They soon opened a first restaurant, Ajanta, at the intersection of Guy and Maisonneuve streets.[35] With profits from this restaurant, they joined other new Bengali immigrants and invested in two other Indian restaurant projects.[36] To increase their revenues, they also applied for permits to serve alcohol at their establishments. Although neither Bhanu Mama nor his partners spoke French, he made sure to always hire French-speaking bartenders to supervise the drink tables at his restaurants.[37] They tapped into the influx of Bangladeshi asylum seekers that had started growing after 1981 by recruiting their waiters and cooks exclusively from amongst the recent arrivals. As news that he helped new immigrants find their footing spread amongst Bangladeshis both in Montreal and amongst their contacts back in Bangladesh, many prospective migrants, despite never having spoken to him before, cited his name as a local contact when they were detained by immigration authorities at the airport or land border. Remembering those moments, Bhanu Mama recounted several occasions where he would receive a phone call either at work or at home to go bail out Bangladeshi detainees who were held by Canada's border control policemen. He also told me that the detainees that he helped in their resettlement included both Hindus and Muslims. Slightly surprised at learning this fact, I asked Bhanu Mama if the deteriorating relations between Bangladesh's Hindu and Muslim communities ever affected his choices in matters such as freeing individuals locked in detention, forming friendships, or

[35] They sold the restaurant in the mid-1990s to the Bangladeshi Muslim Alam family that have since opened a Tim Hortons franchise at the spot. This franchise continues to employ many women from the Hindu Bangladeshi community as cashiers and baristas.

[36] One of these restaurants, that they called 'The Star of India' (L'Etoile de l'Inde) is still operated by individuals who once formed its waiting staff.

[37] Bhanu Mama still speaks no French. When I asked him if this caused him any problems in the 40-odd years that he has lived in Montreal, he cheerfully said "never!" Given this important reality, he attributes his survival in the restaurant to his faith. His faith, he contends, has provided him values that make him treat everyone he encounters as if they were members of his own family. This, he believes, has helped his businesses succeed and has also brought him in touch with kindred Francophone associates that have helped him in his journey.

employing staff. He categorically exclaimed that his generosity did not depend upon the religious identities of the people who sought him out. Current affairs, he said, had no bearing on his interpersonal relations and he continues to maintain friendly ties with the city's Hindu and Muslim Bangladeshis.

As his professional life ascended, Bhanu Mama's personal life also saw several changes. He returned to India in 1977, where his siblings arranged his marriage to Shibani. Like him, she was a Sylheti émigrée to Kailashahar. She followed him back to Montreal, where they built a tightly knit family that today counts three children. They also sponsored the immigration applications of at least a dozen relatives, of whom many live close to their home. Bhanu Mama encouraged his wife to open her own business project, and within ten years of her move, she opened a shop beside their house, named after their daughter Pooja, that sells saris imported from India and Bangladesh. Shibani Maami continues to run the shop and encourages other Hindu Bangladeshi women to run their own businesses and aspire to financial autonomy. As the Hindu Bangladeshi community became much larger, his family participated actively in different activities. While Bhanu Mama and his wife continue to offer financial sponsorship to pujas organized at the MSDT, his children and grandchildren have participated at the community's cultural soirees for over thirty years.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I turn to the accounts of newer Hindu Bangladeshi arrivals whose lives in Montreal were deeply impacted by the foundations set by pioneers in the community like Bhanu Mama. Sharmila Boudi, the focal subject of the next section, provides a compelling account of her migration to Canada that raises important points surrounding notions of gender and authority in our investigation's diasporic population. By recounting her journey

from Bangladesh to Montreal, I argue that temple ownership has enabled women in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community to contest received notions of gender and social authority.

*Sharmila Boudi's Testimony: From Homemaker to Master of Ceremonies*

Mrs. Sharmila Dhar's presence is ubiquitous at the MSDT. From verifying whether the spice box at the temple's kitchen is sufficiently stocked, to soliciting financial sponsorship and volunteers from the city's Bangladeshi-owned businesses, and performing as *compère*, singer, and, sometimes, even actress at cultural events, Sharmila Boudi's is easily among the first faces one sees when attending temple festivals. Unlike many other women from the Hindu Bangladeshi community, she regularly uses her Facebook status box to post incisive observations on subjects of public interest, such as the rise in religious extremism and political violence in Bangladesh, as well the culture shock that Bangladeshis may face as they interact with White Canadians. From time to time, she also writes about tips and strategies that parents in the Bangladeshi diaspora can adopt to resolve clashes with their children, whom they must raise in social milieux that are very different from those in their homelands. She was also among the first Hindu Bangladeshi women to find work as a nursing assistant at the Jewish General Hospital. Since she began her current position, in the early 2000s, she has encouraged women in her community to seek work other than that offered by fast-food franchises and textile manufacturing units that pay minimum wage salaries.

Because of her various aptitudes, she is respected as an influential social commentator by both Bangladeshi Hindus and Muslims in Montreal. Although the story of Sharmila Boudi's relocation from Bangladesh to Montreal bears many similarities to that of Bhanu Mama's, it occurred two decades later. Unlike at the time of Bhanu Mama's migration, Montreal had a more sizeable community of Bengali immigrants in the early 1990s when Sharmila Boudi first arrived

in Canada. Almost fifty years had passed since the Partition of 1947, and clearer distinctions had emerged between South Asia's Hindu and Muslim populations. Moreover, a more pronounced separation had been engendered between Indian and Bangladeshi Bengali identities. Below, I offer the testimony of Sharmila Boudi, as a window to illustrate some of these themes and, more importantly for our present purposes, to help understand how South Asian sociocultural frameworks are transplanted and transformed within Montreal-based settings. The transplantation of these frameworks, I argue, has contributed to the demand for a discrete, Bangladeshi-owned temple space.

Sharmila Boudi was born in the town of Jhalokati that lies in Bangladesh's Barisal Division. Her mother was a homemaker and her father was a teacher at the local school. While many of her great-uncles abandoned their lands in Barisal to settle in Assam and Kolkata at the time of Pakistan's creation, her grandfather, who was a businessman with interests in different East Bengali districts, was convinced by Muslim neighbors to remain in their village and continue living beside them, as they had done so for centuries. Sharmila Boudi, one of four daughters, was born a few weeks before the start of the 1971 Liberation War. Growing up, she often heard stories from her parents of how, while evacuating their home for a refugee camp at the Indian border, they faced the great challenge of silencing the newborn Sharmila's cries as they hid from Pakistani soldiers and pro-Pakistani *razakar*s in jungles and marshes. When the war ended, her family returned to their hometown and resumed their pre-war lives. Following the example of her grandparents, Sharmila Boudi's parents relied upon the deep-rooted ties they shared with their Muslim neighbors and believed that these bonds would only grow stronger in the new Bengali nation.

Sharmila Boudi grew up in a neighborhood that was made up of eight families, seven of which were Hindu and one that was Muslim. The Muslim family was politically influential and was extremely close to its Hindu neighbors. The neighborhood's Hindus addressed the matriarch of this Muslim family as *Maashi*, the kinship term used in the Hindu linguistic register to denote a maternal aunt. The fact that they chose a term from their personal dialect variant over its Muslim equivalent *Khala* is indicative of the ease and intimacy of the relationships between Hindus and Muslims in the *para*. Boudi remembers that Maashi was very protective of the locality's Hindu girls and would shout at troublemakers from other neighborhoods who would try to harass them. It was because of the enduring external and internal alliances she witnessed between Hindus and Muslims during her childhood and adolescence that Sharmila Boudi never felt like she was different from other Bangladeshi citizens. Other than her mother, who performed a daily ritual at their house, most of her family was irreligious. She even goes far as to speculate that her father may secretly be an atheist, given the heterodox views she has observed him express over the course of her life. A sense of affiliation to her Hindu faith, she says, only emerged at times of religious holidays. It was when the Hindus of Jhalakati gathered together to organize *sarbojonin* (public) pujas that she felt like she belonged to a community that extended beyond the borders of Bangladesh --- a community in which her Muslim neighbors were not insiders. Despite this difference, her Muslim peers were also invited to observe and partake in all the different pujas that the town's Hindus commemorated. Hindus were similarly welcomed to participate in the town's Eid festivities. Trained in *Rabindra Sangeet* from a very early age, Boudi began giving voice lessons to Muslim girls in the town when she entered college. The parents of her students unfailingly sent her new clothes each year during Eid.

When her family would receive letters or magazines sent by cousins in Kolkata, she was not especially fascinated by the stories they would recount of life in India. Anecdotes of religious life and the famous Durga Puja in Kolkata held very little interest for her. When her sisters would religiously read gossip concerning the lives of Bollywood and West Bengali film stars, she would rebuke them saying "Why do you eat Bangladeshi rice when you sing the praises of India?"[38] The only accounts of life in India that interested Sharmila Boudi were those regarding its musical personalities. When she first traveled there in her late twenties, her relatives helped her realize her dreams of visiting the homes of singers and musicians she idolized in her childhood. Other than the easier access she had to these figures, Sharmila Boudi never felt a special affinity with West Bengal, despite her sharing both linguistic and ethnic heritages with most of its residents. During our interview, she compared the difference between living in Kolkata and Bangladesh to that of life in Montreal and Toronto. She said,

> Life in Kolkata is hard, fast-paced and competitive. People aren't as hospitable or laidback as they are in Bangladesh. Do you see how I prepared so much food[39] today knowing that you would visit? I have heard that Kolkata's natives have little time to prepare elaborate meals for even family members that visit. The difference between Montreal and Toronto is similar. In Toronto, husbands and wives have little time to see each other's faces because they work multiple jobs to survive. Over here, my husband and I can find time to visit our friends and relatives as often as we want to despite both of working full-time jobs. This is why we like Montreal. Life here reminds us of life back home.

Boudi remembered that as a younger person, she thought of interreligious conflicts as events that occurred in distant cities like Dhaka and Sylhet, as responses to the rapid urbanization

[38] Bengali original: *Tora goon gaash Bharot'er, kintu bhaat khaash Bangladesh'er?*

[39] Boudi had indeed served me a wholesome dinner before our 7 pm interview. After returning from her shift at the hospital earlier that afternoon, she cooked several items that included an *ilish bhapa* dish, *mach'er matha diye moog dal* (Moong Dal with fish head curry), *Murgi'r jhol* (Chicken curry), and *alu phoolkopi'r torkari* (Stir fried potatoes and cauliflower). Her hospitality was indeed unforgettable.

that gripped the nation after 1971. In her small hometown, it was seldom that one heard news of quarrels from areas outside of their immediate vicinity. However, regardless of the cordial relations between Jhalokati's Hindus and Muslims, the sectarian tensions that had spurred the 1947 Partition had never truly disappeared from the collective imaginations of the Bangladeshi populace. Although the founding myths of Bangladeshi nationhood affirmed a secular Bengali ethnolinguistic identity, contrasted to the Pakistani-emphasized Muslim one, they still raised unanswered questions about the relationships between place and identity in South Asia (Jones 374). If Bengali linguistic and cultural characteristics were to be the founding pillars of the Bangladeshi nation-state, what prevented it from seeking political union with its neighbor India, a country that was also founded on secular principles and one where at least 80 million citizens also self-identified as Bengali? If Bangladesh, a nation that was envisaged as a home for the world's Bengalis, did not include historically important Indian Bengali-speaking regions within its territorial borders, could it truly lay claim to its name--one that translates as "The Bengali Nation"? Could Bangladesh re-articulate the Bengali identity category in ways that rendered it independent of India? Furthermore, how could this new Bengali nation accommodate non-Bengali ethnic minorities that constituted 2.75% of the population? The ideological divisions that have plagued Bangladesh's government since its founding have partially stemmed from debates regarding what the answers to these questions should be. As alluded to in earlier sections of this thesis, the traditional fault line within Bangladeshi politics has been that between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) political groups. The nation's first constitution, adopted in 1972, at a time when founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was both Bangladesh's president and the Awami League's party leader, ratified *dharmanirapekshata*

(religious neutrality) as a fundamental principle of Bangladeshi nationhood (Riaz 22).[40] The foil to the secularism enshrined by the Mujib government is provided by that of the Zia ur Rahman's BNP, which came to power in 1977. Zia's policies departed from Mujib's by emphasizing the Muslim identity that he shared with the country's majority. The term Bangladeshi was introduced as a citizenship identity in 1978 by General Zia to replace Bengali, the former appellation used to distinguish Bangladesh nationals. The introduction of this term marks the beginning of the state-sponsored Islamization of Bangladesh's composite Bengali identity. Through a proclamation order on 23 April 1977, the BNP government changed the preamble to the Constitution by adding the words 'Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim' (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) (Guhathakurta, "Communal Politics in South Asia and the Hindus of Bangladesh" 291). Clashes between the two parties continue to dominate Bangladesh politics. In the popular imagination, the AL is perceived as a secular, pro-Hindu party, whereas the BNP is considered communal and supportive of Islamists (Quader). This characterization is also visible qua Montreal, where many of my interlocutors, including Sharmila Boudi, had photos of Sheikh Mujib hung on the walls of their homes. It is also seen in the membership of Montreal chapters of these political parties. Most Bangladeshi Hindus who are involved in these circles tend to be members of the local AL branch. Yet, as Sharmila Boudi astutely observed, activists

[40] Citing the work of Bangladeshi historian Tazeen Murshid, Riaz writes about the similar nature of the state secularisms articulated in both Indian and the first Bangladeshi constitutions. The Indian parallel of *dharmanirapekshata* is *sarvadharmasambhava*, or "equality between all religions." An important comment concerning the resemblances between the two concepts was brought to my attention at a private *adda* held at the house of my Montreal-based friend Monika Mistry. Born in a Hindu Bangladeshi family, Monika renounced her faith at the age of 17 and became involved with different atheist and free-thinker online groups in Bangladeshi. Until 2015, both her husband Tareq Rahim (who was attacked in late 2015 by Islamists) wrote for the online blog *Mukto Mona*, whose founder Avijit Roy was brutally murdered by Muslim extremists in February of that year (Logan). Secularism, in her opinion, is viewed by men like those who attached her husband, as an Indian or Hindu imposition over the country. It, as such, seeks to antagonize what they believe is the fundamentally Muslim character of the nation. Upon closer inspection, one can observe striking correlations between these opinions and those of the Muslim ashraf classes in 19th century Bengal that aspired to purge local religious variants of Hindu insertions.

from all political parties were complicit in perpetuating intolerance towards the nation's non-Muslims. Within this political backdrop, attacks against Bangladesh's Hindus increased through the 1980s, stimulating the mass exodus that has formed the Montreal diaspora.

As she sat on the plane that brought her from Dhaka to Montreal in 1994, Sharmila Boudi described feeling an excitement she may only have felt if she was traveling to heaven. She had witnessed her country change rapidly within the previous couple of years and had at the same time seen the surroundings that she had grown up in slowly collapse. In 1992, she, her mother and a sister visited a cousin's family who lived in Dhaka, which was recovering from massive anti-Hindu riots that had gripped vast sections of the Old City. These riots had occurred in response to the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India thereby indicating a close link between pre-1947 pan-Muslim nationalisms and current times. Chaotic violence that reminded residents of the 1971 War had broken out. Once the violence calmed down, Sharmila and her cousins chose to venture out and explore the city in a rickshaw. As they walked out of the house however, Sharmila Boudi's cousins asked her mother to wipe out the *sindoor* on her hair, and to remove the marriage bangles that were given to her at her wedding. In these uncertain times, it was not wise to be visibly identified as Hindu. On another occasion from the early 1990s, she remembered a group of activists from an Islamist political party march through her neighborhood in Jhalokati, demanding that Bangladeshi Hindus move to India, their 'real country'. When micro-aggressions as this one began growing, Sharmila Boudi's parents looked for ways to move their daughters from the country. Hindu women had been particularly targeted during the most recent riot, and they were concerned for the safety of their four children. While her two eldest sisters were married to men who lived in Kolkata, Sharmila Boudi and her younger sibling had arranged marriages with Sylheti Hindu men who were settled in Canada. She had few

expectations of her life in Montreal. She had, from her childhood, seen most women grow up to become housewives, and had expected to follow these role models. Upon arriving in Montreal, however, she discovered a Hindu Bangladeshi community that was slowly growing. Her husband Apu Da had in the previous year become president of a new organization formed to represent the interests of this growing group, and they hosted their first *Durga Puja* in 1995. Because she was well-known as a singer in Jhalokati, she assumed the responsibility of teaching songs to the few women and children that constituted the non-male section of the community and could present at a cultural soiree during the puja's festivities. Within a couple of years, these soirees grew into extravagant recitals that required an independent space. This requirement was partially responsible for sowing the seeds for building a separate space dedicated especially towards Hindu Bangladeshi activities. In the next and concluding chapter of this thesis, I will provide a general overview of some key events that led to the making of the MSDT, and analyze the importance of religious place in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi diaspora

# Chapter Three: Multiple Identities of the MSDT
## Sacred Space, Cultural Emblem, and Leisure Zone

In this chapter, I will turn my focus to the MSDT itself as a community religious space. The narratives presented by my Hindu Bangladeshi interlocutors are those of members of a temple community striving to envision modes of cultural authenticity that are forged by contexts that both join it with and differentiate it from other Montreal Hindu groups. The MSDT, I argue, functions for its community as a kind of *haut lieu*, or a place erected by its architects to spatially represent cultural symbols that distinguish Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis (Debarbieux 5–6). In what follows, I will provide a more general history of religious activities in the Hindu Bangladeshi community. This history will be contextualized by means of an abbreviated discussion of other Montreal Hindu activities, most notably those in the North Indian and West Bengali communities, and the interactions of Hindu Bangladeshis with these groups. While highly influenced by these interactions, the MSDT community also uses its temple to carve out visions of a Hindu-ness that is simultaneously Bangladeshi and Montreal-centered. I will outline some facets of this vision in the concluding sections of this chapter.

### *Introduction: Crossing boundaries while inaugurating the MSDT*

The morning of March 8, 2014 was wrought with anxiety for Manu Da as he woke up at the crack of dawn and drove his SUV from his house in Ville LaSalle to the nearby neighborhood of Ville Emard. As he made the fifteen-minute-long car ride, Manu Da was filled with immense joy at having finally realized a dream he envisaged since his 1991 arrival in Montreal from Sylhet—the construction of Montreal's first Hindu Bangladeshi-owned temple. Nestled within an inconspicuous block of row houses and businesses on Monk Boulevard, the

temple's presence was announced by a black banner that had the following words printed in a bold, white font—*le temple de religion Sanatan* or the "Sanatan Dharma Temple" (Figure 5).


Figure 5: MSDT on Inauguration Day (March 8, 2014)

After twenty-three years in Canada, the community that Manu Da had served possessed a sacred space it could proudly call its own. At a practical level, ownership over such space meant that the costs associated with organizing both public pujas, and private life-cycle rituals like *annaprasans* and naming ceremonies were significantly reduced. Gone were the days where they needed to pay rental costs to host each religious gathering at temple halls and high school auditoriums that belonged to North Indian or French Canadian-dominated committees. They no longer needed to face situations where the legal owners of the space had restricted their access to specific cupboards, hidden away expensive cooking ingredients and utensils in secret pantries, or set volume limits on the music and hymns they were to sing. In their own temple, there was no

one to whom they needed to pay rent. They could set the dates and hours of their celebrations to correspond with fixed ritually auspicious timings listed in the Bengali *Panjika,* the traditional astronomical almanac. In the MSDT, their control over a kitchen where they alone could determine the quantities of special ingredients required to prepare a *proshad* (*prasād*, offering) of their own choosing was unchallenged. They had the authority to appoint a priest who spoke the same Bengali dialect as most of the temple's visitors. They were also free to sing hymns and recite prayers they had learned from their parents during their childhoods like the *Satyanarayan'er Panchali*.[41] This also included devotional songs to Baba Loknath Brahmachari and Ramakrishna.[42] Moreover, no one had the right to tell them that their religious beliefs were anti-national or inauthentic at a place that belonged to them alone. Hence, the investments which men and women like Manu Da and his wife Purobi had put into building the MSDT were equally emotional as they were financial. Manu Da's attachment to the temple was made evident later that morning whilst he made speeches at its *udbodhon* (inauguration). In his dual capacities as master of ceremonies at the event and as the temple committee's spokesperson, he welcomed the members of his community to what he termed, their *pran'er mondir* (the temple of their hearts).

[41] Following the introduction of Islam to Bengal, a widespread belief in Sufi *pirs* developed among the region's Hindu and Muslim masses. In many instances, the worship practices associated with these pirs were modelled on those propagated by 15th century Bengali Vaishnava *sampradayas*. Of the different syncretic Sufi-Vaisnava traditions that emerged during this period, the most popular was that dedicated towards *Satya-Pir*, a religious figure who many Bengali Hindus identify with the Hindu deity of Satyanarayana (A. Karim). Both Hindu and Muslim poets have composed several devotional hymns detailing the *katha*, or life-story of Satya Pir in the last five or more centuries, some of which remain especially popular among Hindu Bangladeshis. Of these, the Satyanarayan'er Panchali that was written by the mystic Ramchandra Chakraborty (1869-1949) from Bangladesh's Noakhali district, is popular amongst the Montreal-based diaspora.

[42] Lokenath Brahmachari (1730-1890), was a mysterious yogi whose devotional cult remains extremely popular among Bengali Hindus in India and Bangladesh. According to hagiographical accounts, he was born in Barasat, in present-day West Bengal, and, after traveling for a century through India, China, and the Middle East, set up an ashram in Narayanganj, a town which lies in present-day central Bangladesh (M. H. Khan). This ashram, which has affiliated branches overseas, is a revered pilgrimage site for many Bengali Hindus. Based on my research, I am yet to come across scholarly investigations of the Lokenath Baba movement that critically engage with hagiographies written about him.

As an exemplar of the community's sentiment, the phrase "temple of my heart" refers to the temple as the realization of a dream to own and control community socio-religious space. But what exactly are the conditions that contributed to this high priority for ownership, and control over space? In the sections that follow, I explore the context of solidarities forged between co-religionists in the diaspora, asses how these contexts apply to the Hindu Bangladeshi case study, and finally detail how the inauguration of the MSDT fulfilled one of the central greatest longings of this emerging community.

Figure 6: Temple visitors immersed in prayer

The establishment of the MSDT marked an important milestone in the life of this community. Like the neighborhood where their temple was located, Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis re-

invented themselves as a population that was settled and integrated within the city's list of thriving South Asian communities.[43] Many of the friends and acquaintances that I spoke to during the inauguration likened the fact of their ownership of a temple to a victory won in a battle they were forced to wage once they emigrated from Bangladesh to protect their culture. From being a community that, in its early years consisted pre-dominantly of bachelors who worked odd-jobs to survive, they were now represented by a composite group of men, women, and children of whom many operated successful businesses, owned homes and cars, and studied at leading schools and universities. They now owned a building they could call a temple and had absolute power in terms of setting the terms and conditions of how the temple was to be run. The *ubdodhon*'s women participants illustrated this as a community victory in their choice of attire. As I had later learned in my interview with her, Sharmila Boudi had sent a Facebook message to all the Hindu Bangladeshi women she knew asking them to dress in the *laal par shadha shari*. Indeed, many of the women who received this message complied with Sharmila Boudi's request. A white sari with a red border, the garment is, in contemporary times, worn by Hindu Bengali women predominantly on *Bijoya*, the final day of the *Durga Puja* festival where the Goddess's defeat of *Mahishasur*, the buffalo demon, after nine days of battle. Sharmila Boudi explained that the garment's colors were filled symbolism. Within the context of battle, she interpreted the red of the sari's border as a signifier of the dynamism a warrior must adopt when responding to sudden situations on the battlefield. The white represents the purity of mind and spirit, and firm commitment to one's mission, which a warrior should hold on to during the most challenging

[43] Indeed, up until very recently, many Montrealers perceived Ville Emard as a lower income, working-class neighborhood that was characterized by a high incidence of criminality. The public perception of the area as such has shifted primarily because the many new residential complexes that have sprung up over there in the last 5-10 years. It is now perceived of by Montreal inhabitants as a district that is highly suitable for young couples and middle-class families looking for affordable housing options that are increasingly rare in other, already-gentrified sectors (Bonneau and Dumas; Curtis).

moments of fighting. This sari, she believed, should be viewed as a uniform for Hindu women to wear at religious places like temples. To underline the importance of the values it epitomized for Hindu Bangladeshis, she requested all the women who wore the laal par shadha shari to sit in the front rows of the assemblage thereby allowing them and the saris they wore to prominently figure in photographs that were to be taken to remember the event (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Hindu Bangladeshi Women in red-white saris at MSDT Inauguration

Sharmila Boudi's comments might superficially recall Partha Chatterjee's characterization of the upper-caste Bengali attitude towards colonial society that I discussed in Chapter One. Consistent with this worldview, the decision by the community's women to dress the way they choose locates culture, the defining property of the inner sphere, on female bodies. However, aside from their use of a backdrop exemplifying *bhodromohila* domesticity, the women in the MSDT congregation are quite unlike their nineteenth century counterparts. In the world outside the

temple's premises, many of them wear clothing that was different from their fashion choice of that afternoon. Outside the temple's boundaries, several adopted active roles in both outer and inner spheres. In addition to being mothers, daughters-in-law, and sisters within their home space, a fair number were professionals who endeavored towards financial independence. They worked in an array of occupations that ranged from flipping beef patties at McDonalds, to managing real-estate businesses and accounting firms across Montreal. Considering this background, was this homage to a late colonial reading of gendered roles merely a ceremonial performance put up by these women inside the MSDT's confines? What sort of relationship did these scenes from within the temple share with its community's experience outside of it?

*Theorizing Religion in Diasporic Contexts*

To better understand the questions raised above, I will briefly review how scholars of transnationalism have approached the connections between religious identity and diasporic experience. Starting with a 1991 essay by political scientist William Safran which first posed the question of diaspora and referred to it as understudied (Safran 83), a vast corpus of literature from across the social sciences and humanities that engages with notions of diaspora, along with the numerous connotations of the term, has grown up in the last generation (Mavroudi 467–68). From its specifically Jewish origin, where it was used to denote the forced displacement of the Jews from their historical homeland and their consequent dispersion internationally, the word has, in more recent times, come to refer to a wide range of phenomena concerning multi-locale ethnic of other group attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations (Clifford 303). As Robert Cohen, an eminent theorist of migration, points out, diaspora has indeed become "one of the buzzwords of a post-modern age" with an increasing number of transnational

communities choosing to define themselves as diasporas (Cohen 3). Chantal Bordes-Benayoun identifies many examples of multi-sited, non-ethnic collectivities that have been labeled diasporas in her essay Contemporary Diasporas, Nationalism, and Transnationalism Politics (2010). She refers to official publications from France's Ministry of Education that describe academic collaborations led by scholars dispersed across several countries as "projects overseen by a diaspora of scholars" (Bordes-Benayoun 47). Similarly, she draws the attention of readers to usages of the term in Gender Studies where the notion of a queer diaspora explains the experiences of individuals who belong to both queer and minority ethnic groups. Bordes-Benayoun attributes the recent proliferation of diaspora discourse to shifting perceptions of the term. While it once was used to highlight the painful uprooting of the Jewish exile, it has now come to signify a positive experience of group belonging (Bordes-Benayoun 47). In a world increasingly affected by international migration, members of diasporic populations tend to challenge classical models of the nation-state rooted in the assumption of cultural homogeneity shared by a primordial ethnicity. Breaking the connection between ethnicity and geographical location, diasporic identities are rooted in collective solidarities that transcend national frontiers and locations. However, despite this broken connection to a fixed location, Bordes-Benayoun proposes that diasporic subjects gravitate towards other unifying identifiers, such as religion, when faced with the disturbances associated with exile (Bordes-Benayoun, "Cultes et Rituels en Mouvement" 387) to maintain a sense of community. Furthermore, religion offers members of diasporic communities' opportunities and settings that are helpful in reviving or reinventing coherent, collective histories based on ancestral traditions (Trouillet 5).

Hence, *émigré*s perceive the building of religious venues such as churches, mosques, and temples, as well as the creation or importation of objects of worship and the transposition or

adaptation of rituals, as necessary steps in claiming diasporic identities. If we apply these propositions to our discussion of Montreal's Hindu diaspora, we observe that immigrant-owned temples operate as physical landmarks that express the differentiated identities of their proprietors. They are, as it were, "geosymbols", —a term introduced by the late French geographer Joel Bonnemaison, and used to denote "spatial indicators or signs in space that mirror and shape identity" (Bonnemaison 45). Bonnemaison elaborates upon the term by drawing upon his experiences conducting fieldwork on islands from Melanesia to Madagascar. Investigating "myths and traditions" narrated by his interlocutors about diverse geographical entities, he contends that some territories were reimagined as sacred because of their association with a culturally important figure such as "a civilizing hero" (Bonnemaison 46). As sites where the hero may have revealed magical powers, these geographical spaces become defined as geosymbols, or places that, in the eyes of the societies or ethnic groups in question, take on symbolic dimensions connected to such heroes. As spatial footprints that indicate culturally specific references such as the hero's power, the existence of geosymbols anchors and reinforces the identity of the community around it. Geosymbols resemble *haut-lieux*, a term suggested at the outset of this thesis as useful in characterizing the symbolic value of the MSDT to members of the community. Like the geosymbol, a *haut-lieu* is also a spatial indicator that expresses a system of cultural values or meanings.[44] However, while a *haut-lieu* refers to a specific place, geosymbols are broader in scope and can connote an entire landmass or itineraries of heroes memorialized in pilgrimage circuits (Trouillet 6). Diasporic places of worship, I argue, are both *haut-lieux* and geosymbols in the eyes of their owners and managers. In these dual capacities, they are places where temple communities can re-group to navigate spatial and temporal barriers

[44] An example of a haut-lieu includes the Bastille Prison, a place that in addition to being a physical site in Paris, also symbolizes French Republican values (Debarbieux 6).

between their new and former homelands. They thus function as centers to consolidate identities that distinguish immigrant contexts. By the fact of their existence, they provide diasporic communities a new platform where certain kinds of appeals can be made. These are appeals to adopt what are interpreted as original religious practices, ritual and gestures from distant moments and birth locations, where community members inhabited empowering spaces within the folds—rather than the margins—of a nation-state. However, the material separation between diasporic and non-diasporic locations interrupts immigrant pursuits of such dreams. Context-specific realities like the demographic contours of the congregation, budgets, materials, and available spaces often prevent overseas agents from simply transplanting models of temple administration from their previous frameworks onto new ones. In the process of temple building, they "compromise (with these realities) and settle at local optima" (McDaniel 6). Immigrant-owned temples thereby become loci of such negotiations, made by devotees to accomplish more immediate goals. I will now explain how the trajectory taken by Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis to establish the MSDT, a place that, considering all that has been described above, holds an enormously symbolic value for its owners.

*The Early Hindu Bangladeshi Community and its Interactions with other Montreal Hindus*

Although there has been a notable Hindu presence in Montreal since the late 1960s,[45] Hindus who identified also as Bangladeshi, as mentioned in Chapter Two, began arriving in Montreal only in the 1980s. During my fieldwork, I learned that first of these early arrivals was Rithish Chakraborty,[46] the current priest at the MSDT, who landed at the city's Mirabel Airport in 1982 with a job offer at a local textile factory in one hand, and a claim for political asylum in another. Unlike many other Hindu Bangladeshis who had immigrated in later years, Rithish was a Brahmin and religiously well-educated, coming from an illustrious lineage of priests and Sanskrit scholars. While conducting interviews among the founders of Hindu temple communities in Ontario, academic Paul Younger observed that many of his interlocutors described being indifferent to religion as young adults in their homelands, and discovering a need for a faith-based community only after immigrating to Canada at a later age (Younger 128). Rithish's memories of his youth, that he shared during our own interview, are not very different

[45] The first South Asians to settle in Canada were a group of Punjabi Sikh officers in the British Indian Army who, while on their way to attend the 1897 Diamond Jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria's reign in London, made a short transit stop in Vancouver. Some of them discovered abundant prospects for work in the then largely uninhabited Canadian West Coast and, after participating in the Jubilee's festivities, returned to British Columbia where they pursued some of these opportunities (Younger 127). Within a few years, this first group was joined by a couple of thousand other Punjabi migrants who were soon an important part of the forest industry and other efforts to introduce agriculture to Western Canada. After promoting racist policies against its Asian population for years, the Canadian government effectively blocked immigration from India in 1908 (Johnston). After the Second World War, some of these restrictions were made more flexible thereby allowing smaller numbers of South Asians, many of whom had previously lived in continental Europe and the United Kingdom, to resettle in urban centers across Quebec and Ontario. In 1967, new immigration laws were enacted by the government of Pierre Trudeau that addressed certain racist aspects of existing Canadian immigration policies. After this reversal, Hindus from all parts of the globe began migrating to Canada (Younger 128).

[46] Rithish Babu was born in Sylhet in 1954. Like Dileep Babu, he was also a member of the *Mukti Bahini* during the Liberation War. After being persecuted by politicians from the BNP for articles he had published in a local newspaper that criticized the post-Mujib government, he migrated to Bremen, Germany in 1977 where for five years, he simultaneously worked as a German-Bengali translator and unsuccessfully attempted to seek asylum. He had heard from Bangladeshi Muslim friends he had in Germany that the Canadian government at the time had a less rigorous vetting system for asylum seekers. Following up on their advice, he encountered an elderly Ashkenazi Jewish gentleman who owned a textile factory in Montreal's then-prosperous Garment district. This man had guaranteed to provide Rithish work at his factory if he could find the means to legally enter Canada. Placing his faith in this guarantee, Rithish brought a flight ticket to Montreal, a city where he knew nobody.

from those recalled by Younger's interlocutors. Despite having learned to minister at various kinds of *puja*s from his father, Rithish's Hindu identity had not been an important aspect life when he lived in Bangladesh and Germany. After spending several months where he had no contact with other South Asians, Rithish learned from colleagues at work about a Hindu temple near Montreal's Beaubien metro station, on a street that was not very far from his workplace. Curious to meet coreligionists, he paid a visit to this temple.


Figure 8: ISKCON Montreal (Courtesy of Andrea Marion Pinkney)

Situated in the Rosemont-Petite Patrie borough, the Hindu Mission of Canada (HMQ) was established by Hindi and Punjabi-speaking immigrants from North India. Many of these individuals had migrated to Montreal in the late 1960s to work mainly as engineers, bankers, or

as international students at McGill University. At the time, the only Hindu center in the city with a Brahmin officiant was owned and managed by ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The ISKCON movement's Montreal links date back to 1967 when Quebecois disciples of its founder, Prabhupada, converted what once was an Anglican Church into a temple (Ketola 313) (See Figure 8). Because of the highly sectarian nature and the overall newness of the ritual style that it advocated, Montreal's first Hindus did not regularly patronize the ISKCON temple. Amongst those that were actively engaged in the ISKCON cause, fewer were implicated in its management and board of trustees.[47]

As the 1970s progressed and more and more Hindus from various parts of the world began migrating to Canada, Hindu Montrealers, like their counterparts in many other North American cities, adopted various methods to stage more collective performances of their faith. Much of this initial activity was decentralized in structure and was organized in informal settings. For the most part, the earliest Hindu immigrants performed their personal rituals at home altars and shrines. While some met up in basements at the homes of individual members to participate in informal *bhajan* (devotional singing) groups, others rented semipublic spaces like high school or church auditoriums to celebrate larger festivals like Diwali and Dussehra. However, because Canadian authorities would only offer legal recognition to marriages, and post-death rituals conducted by anyone designated as "clergy", Hindu-Montrealers visited the ISKCON temple primarily to conduct life cycle rituals for family members (Younger 129). The community that inaugurated the HMQ was born out of a similar association that had been

[47] I have been acquainted with Montreal's ISKCON temple since 2007 and have visited it on several occasions. Based on my many visits and interactions with various Hindus in the city (for both, academic and non-academic purposes), I can affirm that the described situation concerning the temple's leadership persists. Although people of South Asian descent frequently attend its largest weekly gathering, its Sunday evening kirtan and accompanying prasad, two-thirds of the site's board of directors are Francophone Quebecois men.

gathering unofficially at various locations to sing bhajans and kirtans on important Hindu festivals. As the list of attendees at these meetings soon grew to include hundreds of people, its conveners identified a building on Montreal's Bellechase Street and sponsored visas for two Punjabi-speaking Brahmins to serve as priests at this temple.

Soon after its inauguration, the HMQ emerged as a focal point for most Montreal Hindu get-togethers in the 1980s (Spolia). Other than the Bangladeshis, other non-Indian communities including Sri Lankan Tamils-Canadians, and Indo-Caribbean Hindu-Canadians also attended and participated in temple functions for a time (Boisvert 159). Catering to the various needs of its culturally heterogenous patrons compelled the HMQ's founders to shift their understandings of how temples should function in thought and in practice. They received conceptual cues for what some of these shifts could be from innovations in temple building and administration that were being carried out by Hindu communities not only in other North American cities, but also at major urban centers in India. In "Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World," scholar Joanne Waghorne considers the effects of demographic shifts in India's metropolitan areas on the sectarian affiliations of the nation's urban temples. As sites that attract migrants from a plethora of ethnic, caste, and sectarian origins, many localities in Indian mega-cities have emerged as extremely diverse places where individuals and families, who may never have encountered each other in rural contexts because of an assortment of restrictions, live side by side as neighbors (Waghorne 1–4). To accommodate the multifaceted ritual needs of urban Indian religion, Waghorne cites the rise of neighborhood temples that, unlike its analogues from former times, possess sectarian identities that are as heterogeneous as those of the devotees who live in its immediate vicinity. As evidence for her findings, she mentions her visit to the Sri Sankara Narayana temple in Chennai in the mid-1990s. Built at least thirty years prior in a more

recently-developed residential part of Chennai's Western suburbs, the main deity at, what she labels, "this eclectic temple" is an image of the main Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu represented as conjoined twins (Waghorne 6). By sculpting its principal icon in this fashion, the temple's trustees believed that they had "conjoined the two major sects of Hinduism (Shaiva and Vaishnava)" thereby, respecting the cooperative spirit of the neighborhood's inhabitants who "belonged to various walks of life and to various communities" (Waghorne 6). While such kinds of ecumenical impulse are not novel in Hindu ritual contexts, the worship of major deities in a common temple space constructed in accordance with precepts enumerated by Sanskrit manuals like the various *Agama Śāstra*s was indeed a very innovative concept. In other works, Waghorne writes that such ecumenism was adopted by several Hindu-American communities "refused to dichotomize themselves into the old community divisions and lobbied under the slogan of unity under one *rajagopuram* (ornate tower at the entrance to Hindu temples)" (Waghorne, "Spaces for a New Public Presence The Sri Siva Vishnu and Murugan Temples in Metropolitan Washington, D. C." 6).

The HMQ—and the MSDT community that broke away from it—were similarly affected by these developments in temple structuring. To reflect the plurality in beliefs subscribed to by its regular visitors, HMQ trustees had separate icons of the deities Durga, Krishna and his consort Radha, Vishnu and Lakshmi consecrated at the temple's main altar (See Figure 9). They adapted a practice from the ISKCON temple of sponsoring a *langar*, or a free communal lunch on Sunday afternoons to promote attendance at the morning prayer. Elder North Indian matriarchs would closely supervise younger bachelors like the first Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers, as the latter rolled out *chapatis* and boiled the chickpeas to be served for the post-prayer meal. Hence, by diversifying the deities installed at its primary altar and by drawing in the

co-operation of younger men from a variety of different ethnicities in its community kitchen, the HMQ's board filled a significant role as Montreal's Hindu community center.

Figure 9: Principal deities at the Hindu Mission's main altar

After his first visit to the Hindu Mission, Rithish became highly involved in its activities. He visited it several times in a week where he became acquainted with many North Indian Hindus who, in addition to teaching him Hindi and Punjabi, also introduced him to worship practices from their hometowns. They also introduced him to the city's *Kolkata'r Bangali* community.[48] Because of commonalities in their linguistic heritages, Rithish took an active

[48] Almost all the Bangladeshis that I have interacted with refer to Indian Bengalis as *Kolkata'r Bangali* (the Bengalis from Kolkata). This appellation is also extended to Indian Bengalis with origins outside the greater Kolkata-region

interest in Indian Bengali-organized events, namely the annual Durga Puja that it had been celebrating since 1975.[49] From 1985 onwards, Rithish was an active supporter of Montreal's Kolkata Bengalis and the HMQ. At the time, there were also at least thirty other Hindu Bangladeshis in the city who were bachelors like Rithish. Unlike Rithish however, most of these men were less familiar with Hindu rituals and worship practices of any sort. During our conversation, he likened their situation to that of unsupervised cows randomly wandering in an open field—sometimes in directions that might eventually bring harm upon them. As a Brahmin and as the eldest amongst them, he felt a need to create spaces in Montreal where these men could collect to celebrate "their Hindu and Bengali essences."[50] To bring his intentions to fruition, he discussed his plans with an Indian Bengali physician named Dr. Banik, who had roots in Bangladesh's Noakhali district. Together, they conceived a proposal to organize a monthly *Satyanarayana Puja* at the Hindu Mission's main hall. These pujas were to resemble those of the Bengali sermons on Sanskrit scriptures such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that Rithish had seen his father deliver at shrines to *Satya-Pir* in his childhood. They suggested this idea to

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and the West Bengal state. As discussed in previous chapters, the standardized register of Bengali or *shuddho/porishkar bhasha* (the pure/clean speech) was based upon the speech patterns of Kolkata's *bhodrolok* or gentlefolk—a population that was primarily upper-caste Hindu. Considering its prestige and historical connotations, Indian Bengalis tend communicate with each other in the Calcattian dialect. While Bangladeshis study this dialect at school, they, unlike most Indian Bengalis, seldom use it in more familiar settings such as during conversations with friends or family members. In the years that I have known individuals from both Bengals, I have noticed Indian Bengalis mock speakers of Bangladeshi Bengali dialects as country bumpkins. Bangladeshis reciprocate by calling out their Indian counterparts on speaking what they call the language of the books. Such parochial talk reveals that in addition to religious differences, Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis are also divided by their distinctive linguistic heritages.

[49] The original committee that organized Indian Bengali Durga Puja was re-named as the Indian Bengali Association of Montreal (IBAM) in the late 2000s. Their Puja is the only one in the city to be represented in cyberspace by a professionally-managed website that lists the dates of daily events, and keeps an organized record of past activities. As readers will learn in subsequent sections of this chapter, the professional front put up by Montreal's Indian Bengalis stands in contrast that of the Bangladeshi Puja which many of my Indian Bengali friends describe as possessing a more family-like atmosphere. As an Indian Bengali interlocutor of mine said, "One needn't check a website to find out where and when the Bangladeshi Puja is to happen. One must either know a Hindu Bangladeshi or be connected to one on Facebook to receive a personal invitation to an MSDT Puja."

[50] Bengali original: *Hindu ebong Bangali tottvo*.

the board at the Hindu Mission, who provided them access to the temple's assembly hall and its main altar on the first Saturday of the month. A group of forty Bengalis from both India and Bangladesh attended this first Puja where Dr. Banik oversaw the recitation of different devotional hymns and Rithish delivered a discourse on a subject from the *Bhagavad Gita*. This puja, which continues till today, became extremely successful amongst Montreal's Hindu Bengalis. It increased in scale during the ensuing years, becoming a focal point for all the city's Bengali activities in the second half of the 1980s. Attracting up to as much as three hundred people, this Saturday puja was a venue for Hindu Bengalis to socialize while wearing their 'Sunday best'. Young men teamed up in the HMQ kitchen, positioned right above the temple's primary prayer hall, to cook an exclusively Bengali offering (*prasād*) where a rice dish was the central ingredient rather than the North-Indian standard flatbread (*chapati*). As they waited in the long lines in the confined premises extending from the prayer hall to the dining space, attendees received ample time to socialize with old friends, or to strike up conversations with strangers and form new friendships.

Although the *Satyanarayana Puja* was, at its outset, conceived of as a joint Indo-Bangladeshi venture, the nature of the partnership was altered in the early 1990s. As sectarian tensions boiled over into violence in Bangladesh, the population of Hindu asylum seekers swelled across Canada. Fleeing towns where they had witnessed temples and other religious icons being vandalized by politically influential Muslims, Bangladeshi Hindus looked to Canadian temples as sites of strength where fractured communities from their former homelands could be revived. With a population of at least a thousand people, the number of Bangladeshis at the Montreal *Satyanarayana Puja* outnumbered that of Indian Bengalis for the first time in 1992. Almost immediately after, cracks began to appear in the relationships between members of the

two groups. Traditional rivalries between Eastern and Western Bengal, some of which I have already alluded to in Chapter One, exacerbated some of these tensions. In our interview, Sharmila Boudi narrated an anecdote she had heard after she first moved to Montreal, about how Indian Bengali managers of the puja's prasad table offered frugal food portions to the Bangladeshis. The Bangladeshis in turn attributed such behavior by Indians to the stereotypically uptight and stingy character held to be typical of Kolkata natives. On a more serious note, Rithish and other interlocutors feared that Indians judged Bangladeshis as "lesser Hindus" because of their roots in a Muslim-majority country. In private conversations, many Indians would address Hindu Bangladeshis as Bangals. Although this term is used in India to refer specifically to East Bengali migrants, it was once used by upper-caste Hindus from rural Sylhet as an anti-Muslim slur. As grievances of this sort became more and more common, Montreal's Indian Bengali and Hindu Bangladeshi communities began organizing independent social and religious meetings.

This separation was formalized in 1993 when a set of Hindu Bangladeshi men gathered to found the 'The Bangladesh Hindu Association of Quebec' (BHQ). The stated aim of this registered non-profit organization was to create spaces where "(members) practice **our** language, culture, traditions and religion of **our** Hindu Bengali community" (emphasis added) (facebook.com/BDHAQM). One of the first steps taken by this organization to assert its autonomy from the Indian Bengalis was its takeover of the monthly *Satyanarayana Puja*. As Dr. Banik resigned from his post as convener in the preceding year citing health-related complains, the BHQ acquired exclusive control of this once collaborative East-West Bengali initiative. In the following year, they re-asserted their independence by arranging a separate *Durga Puja*. To do this, they relied on a budget composed exclusively of personal donations given by the BHQ's

office bearers and esteemed Bengali-Quebecer businessmen such as Bhanu Mama. From ordering the *pratima*, the traditional icon of the Goddess from an artisan's workshop in Kolkata, to preparing vast amounts of *prasād* that, it was decided would be served for free (unlike the Indians who continue to charge a fee from attendees to cover food costs), the BHQ directed all the operations involved in executing this elaborate, four-day long puja.[51] A high school auditorium near Montreal's Charlevoix metro station was rented out to serve as the puja's venue. Although men outnumbered the women and children by a significant margin, the few Hindu Bangladeshi ladies that were present at the puja exercised their authority by re-grouping the children to showcase public song-and-dance performances on each evening of the festival. In the months leading up to the Durga Puja, they coached children's performances of Bengali music, while some of the adults rehearsed and staged a Bengali play to entertain spectators. At least 600 people, from Montreal's Hindu and Muslim Bangladeshi societies, and the Indian Bengali group came to witness this first, exclusively Bangladeshi-led *Durga Puja* in autumn 1993. Inspired by its success, the BHQ's leadership was encouraged by Montreal Bengalis to observe other religious holidays. In response to these requests, a day-long *Saraswati Puja* was organized in early 1994 at the Hindu Mission's main hall that was equally well-received by community members.

Subsequently, the HBQ established celebrations for most of the important festivals highlights of the Hindu Bengali calendar. The pattern of activities followed in 1993 was adopted as a standard template for all future puja. However, the scale of BHQ festivities transformed

[51] I found it curious to note that the first icon worshipped by a Bangladeshi Hindu association seeking to differentiate itself from the Indian Bengali group was constructed by someone from Kolkata. I asked Rithish Babu if there were specific reasons for why they chose to approach an Indian, rather than Bangladeshi artisan. I learned that because of the much smaller market for Hindu images in Bangladesh, local artisans are unable to sculpt festival *pratimas* that are export-quality. Most of the Bangladeshi pratimas, he said, are clay and therefore incapable of surviving the journey by boat from Asia to North America.

rapidly in succeeding years. Furthermore, the participant numbers at these gathering sustained an exponential increase. As the rise of majoritarian politics contributed to deteriorate the already strained relationships between Bangladesh's Muslims and religious minorities,[52] more and more Bangladeshi Hindus charted the route to Montreal that men like Rithish had exposed to them to a decade earlier. Their numbers had grown so large, a second Hindu Bangladeshi association, the Hindu Bangladeshi Development Committee, was formed in 1995 due to a conflict that had emerged between two competing power cliques that had vied for HBQ leadership.[53] In the meanwhile, many of the first Hindu Bangladeshi Montrealers grew more prosperous in the 1990s. They acquired the resources required to sponsor re-settlement visas for family members who had remained in Bangladesh. As parents, grandparents, wives, and cousins joined already settled relatives, the Hindu Bangladeshi population in Montreal grew to include nearly six thousand people in the late 2000s. Once in Canada, the second and third wave of immigrants were encouraged by those that had preceded them to pursue employment and financial independence, irrespective of their age or gender. Due to these changes, many Hindu Bangladeshi families came to acquire the economic capital that was necessary to buy independent homes and businesses in Montreal suburbs. The changes also revamped the community's Puja celebrations. Apart from the monthly *Satyanarayana Puja* and other privately

[52] Although a detailed examination of the matter is beyond the scope of this thesis, many of my interlocutors have remarked that the increased tensions between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh have had negative repercussions on their friendships with Bangladeshi Muslims in Montreal. Rithish for example, commented on how it had become extremely rare to see locally-based Muslims come to watch the Durga Puja, something that he felt had been was much more common in the early 1990s. Similarly, Mithu Da, the current secretary at the HBQ, remarked that while Hindu and Muslim individuals in Montreal may be close friends, institutional ties between the two Bangladeshi diasporic communities remain formal and strained.

[53] This second committee inaugurated its own temple on the weekend of July 22, 2017 at a site located almost 750 meters away from the MSDT. Current members of the HBQ have spoken to me about how they regret the conditions that led to this split. They believe that if the two parties were to re-unite, they could construct a bigger temple that would resemble some of the larger Hindu and Sikh temples in suburban Montreal.

sponsored pujas, most of the Hindu Bangladeshi religious functions were arranged outside of the HMQ. High school auditoriums and community centers that could accommodate as many as a thousand people were selected to host these gatherings. Community members also had the means to provide more substantial donations to run annual festivals. For example, the budget collected for the 2013 Durga Puja alone amounted up to $50,000. This sum sponsored free lunch and dinnertime prasād for as many as eight hundred people for all four days of the festival, the rent of the premises, a professional sound system for the evening's cultural recitals, and costs associated with flying in and entertain popular performing artists from West Bengal and Bangladesh. It had therefore, become obvious to the HBQ's leadership in the early 2010s that they had finally acquired the monetary resources and the administrative skills that were requisite to owning an autonomous temple. This recognition led them to develop concrete plans for establishing the MSDT, as discussed below.

*Recognizing Difference and Owning Temples*

To understand why owning temple space constituted such a fundamental yearning for Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis, it is important to consider how state recognition facilitates resettlement in diasporic communities. In her groundbreaking study of Buddhist organizations in the Greater Toronto Area, anthropologist Janet McLellan investigates efforts made by her interlocutors to create and articulate distinctive ethnic and religious identities (McLellan 85). This sort of self-asserted identity empowers diasporic communities to assert 'cultural agency' (Baumann 1996). Furthermore, even as it marks their difference, such self-created community offers them mechanisms for individual integration into their new societies to gain equitable access to available social and political resources (McLellan 85). Emphasizing cultural agency,

McLennan argues, often encourages leaders of Canadian ethnoreligious groups to essentialize specific images of their identities. They therefore insist that certain aspects of their identity that accentuate their cultural difference, notably food, religious ceremonies, language, or clothing, are more salient than others. As evidence for this argument she cites the example of Canadian Sikhs who, despite being the largest subgroup of Canada's Indian diaspora, "resist being categorized according to their national origin" (McLellan 86). [54]

The creation of temple space, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is crucial to efforts made by members of diasporic communities to foster social cohesion. Ironically, it is through the creation of such distinctive religious cultures that those who have found refuge in their new countries can claim a place and achieve a kind of belonging. Additionally, they are visible stages on which the larger national public may witness such performances of cultural distinctiveness thereby legitimating the claims of authenticity and value made by their owners. Considering their relevance to both community insiders and those on the outside, diasporic temples represent "spaces of liminality" (i.e. spaces between social stations) (Shinde 450). Individuals that interact with such spaces place themselves under the care of "priest-like intermediaries" that mediate their liminal emplacement between everyday life and an "environment created by religious rituals" (Shinde 450–51). By conceptualizing of immigrant-owned temples as such, we may treat them as sites wherein their proprietors may steer visions of cultural difference and authenticity that are rooted in local conditions. In their previous setting where sacred space was shared or rented, the capacity for Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis to declare their distinctiveness was fundamentally predicated upon discourses of Hindu authenticity advanced by others, namely

[54] McLennan's evidence comes from Verne A. Dusenbery's essay "The poetics and politics of recognition: Diasporan Sikhs in pluralist polities" (1997). In the essay, Verne compares the experiences of Singaporean and Canadian Sikhs, who have each resisted being categorized as Indians by authorities within their respective countries (Dusenbery 749–51).

North Indians and West Bengalis. In their own temple, their interpretations of religious authenticity receive permanent residence.

*The MSDT Today*

In the concluding section of this chapter, I briefly outline some of the complex identities that the MSDT has assumed following its inauguration. These identities, I argue, stem from its unique positioning at the intersection of different entities that are both physical and abstract. Since 2014, the MSDT has emerged as the chief community center for Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis. Its location on Monk Boulevard, where a yoga studio occupies the building on its left, and a Subway franchise to its right, serves as an evocative metaphor to describe the multiple, and seemingly contradictory, worldviews that the MSDT bestrides.[55] Although it was conceived of as a haven for Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis, its official, English-only website makes few explicit allusions to the Bangladeshi, or even the distinct Sylheti heritage of its owners.[56] Furthermore, it provides no indication of the MSDT's institutional links to the BHQ,

[55] The current location of the MSDT was selected by its secretary Anup Chowdhury (Mithu Da) who works as a realtor. During our private interview, Mithu Da spoke about how he came across a 'For Sale' sign while driving past the property that was to house the MSDT. Familiar with zoning laws and prices of real estate in the area, Mithu Da realized that the building may respond to the community's budgetary and location-based concerns regarding the temple. Previously an office for bureaucrats engaged by the City of Montreal, the site was purchased in 2013 and was inaugurated after a short renovation process.

[56] Hints of its distinct Bangladeshi traditions appear in items 6 and 7 of the website's list of 'Its (Temple's) Activities'. Without referring to the words Bengali or Bangladeshi, item 5 state the temple's commitment to serve a celebratory site for specifically Bengali festivals such as the Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi Pujas. Item 7 mentions that "different groups in the Hindu community, who are the disciples/followers of the gurus such as Ram Thakur, Ramkrishna Paramhansha Dev, Baba Loknath, Thakur Anukul Chandra, Prabhu Jagatbandhu, Swami Prabhupad and any other guru….(organize) separate religious functions in honour of their gurus on different occasions" ("Sanatan Dharma Mission Statement") Again, despite the fact that the cited gurus are all Bengali (with 4 of the 6 being East Bengali), no reference of their Bengali-ness is provided. Also, there is a single photograph on the site's home page that depicts men and women holding the Bangladeshi flag as they march in a Canada Day Parade celebrating multiculturalism, the photo has no accompanying caption listing the MSDT's connection to Bengal, Bangladesh, or even the BHQ.

its parent organization. Instead, the website highlights the MSDT as a place that is accessible to all kinds of Hindus ("Sanatan Dharma Mission Statement"). The second item listed in the temple's mission statement provides an affirmation to "advance religion…in accordance with the tenets and doctrines of Sanatan Dharma Hindu faith and culture" ("Sanatan Dharma Mission Statement"). Other items on this page suggest a comparable concern with empowering a global Hindu community that transcends national or sectarian boundaries.

The MSDT's stated aim to remain accessible to Hindus of non-Bangladeshi origin is also reflected in the daily rituals and the annual cycle of *utsavas* (festivals) that it hosts. The quotidian rites that its priest Rithish Chakraborty[57] performs are modelled on Sanskritic notions of how temple-based pujas should be executed. Within this worldview, temples are perceived "as the concrete shape of the Essence; as such…(a temple)… is the residence and vesture of God" (Kramsrich 165). Enthroned upon a central altar, the temple's icons assume humanlike qualities. And like other human beings, the temple's divinities must be fed, clothed, and put to sleep (Boisvert 163). The sequence of day-to-day pujas at the MSDT responds to these needs of its enshrined images. Performed every day from 6-7:30 am, Rithish wakes up the deities and offers them 'breakfast'[58] during the first puja. Following this ceremony, the temple remains open to members of the public who are welcome to visit and offer *darśan,*[59] or to request Rithish to perform special ceremonies. At noontime, a second meal is prepared and then offered to the icons during the afternoon puja. Rithish locks the temple's doors and takes care of more

[57] Rithish Chakraborty, as readers learned in an earlier section of this chapter, is also the first Hindu Bangladeshi to migrate to Montreal.

[58] The layout of the MSDT was designed to deliberately imitate that of the HMQ. A kitchen and a public dining area are situated right above the main prayer hall. Unless there are volunteers that arrive to offer help, Rithish usually prepares the daily prasād on his own.

[59] "*Darśan:* Seeing the divine image is the single most common and significant element of Hindu worship" (Eck 2).

mundane responsibilities[60] from 1:30 pm until approximately 5 pm when he re-opens the temple for the evening puja that puts the deities to sleep. Because he was a member HMQ's governing body for almost thirty years, the daily pujas that he performs are inspired by the North-Indian style pujas he witnessed at the HMQ. The mantras that he chants while consecrating the daily prasād are Hindi mantras that he learned from the Punjabi priest at the HMQ. Similarly, the song that accompanies the evening *aarti*, (lamp offering) (Eck 48) is the popular Hindi bhajan *Om Jai Jagadish Hare*, a hymn which many of my interlocutors, including Rithish himself, claim to have been unfamiliar with when they lived in Bangladesh. Other examples of North Indian celebrations that the MSDT hosts include an annual puja organized by Hindu Bangladeshi women to the Goddess Santoshi Mata (see images 10 and 11), a relatively new Goddess in the Hindu pantheon whose worship cult was propelled to pan-Indian prominence following the 1975 release of the Bollywood film *Jai Santoshi Maa*.

[60] Some of these mundane responsibilities include washing dishes, polishing religious apparel, keeping the space clean and tidy, or visiting the bank to deposit money.

Figure 10: 2017 *Santoshi Ma Puja* (Courtesy of Shaktibrata Haldar Manu)

Seeing such a strong North Indian influence at the MSDT, an important question that one may ask is what is it that distinguishes it as a Bangladeshi place? My interlocutors have responded in diverse ways to this query. Sharmila Boudi, for example, noted that there are specific tasks and responsibilities at the MSDT that she feels particularly obliged to oversee.

> "That temple (HMQ)", she observed, "was mine only on the days of the month that I visited for the Satyanarayana Puja. Other than then, it was always someone else's temple. This one, on the other hand is always mine. I don't feel like I'm intruding upon someone else's responsibilities. I can go knock on its door at any time during the day and Rithish Da, who treats me like his little sister, welcomes me and ensures that I am comfortable. Similarly, I reciprocate. I walk up to the kitchen and double-check to see if the pantry is adequately stocked. If I see that specific spices are missing, I make a mental note to go re-fill them so that Dada isn't inconvenienced"

Sharmila Boudi's testimony on this subject is not unique. Many other interlocutors, most of whom are not clerics, have told me that thoughts about the temple's upkeep occupies much of their day. Even though a lot of what is celebrated at the MSDT is not exclusively Bangladeshi *per se*, it is the capacity host these celebrations that renders them as distinctive to Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community. I now turn to consider the implications of temple ownership in the following, concluding section of this thesis.

# Concluding Reflections
## "Temple of the Heart"

To understand the meanings latent to the label "temple of the heart," it is important to revisit popular perceptions of temples as solely religious centers that cater to pre-existing communities. A theoretical model to guide such a cognitive shift can be gleaned from Justin McDaniel's most recent book *"Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's Museums, Monuments and Amusement Parks"* (2016). In his appraisal of Buddhist leisure sites in South East Asia, McDaniel urges readers to view the sites that he investigates as composites— "made of many parts and dependent on things outside its control" (McDaniel 24). Using a metaphor from computational modeling, McDaniel likens these sites to complex adaptive systems. This denotes systems that are composed of heterogenous parts that, if studied individually, do not convey a comprehensive understanding of the entire system's behavior. Hence, it becomes vital to see a system's constitutive elements as discrete parts of "dynamic, process-oriented, and ever-changing networks," to fully appreciate the ways in which they contribute towards preserving a collective whole (McDaniel 24).

The metaphor of the complex adaptive system is equally relevant to the present study of the MSDT. By viewing the MSDT as just a religious center, one overlooks its function as place where diasporic communities may strengthen inner-group cohesion. Interpreting the MSDT as just another Bangladeshi temple ignores the various layers of evolution cultural communities undergo following an exodus from their former homes. Within this interpretive model, the many of years of interaction between the Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshis Bangladeshi and Hindus from other national contexts are sidelined. And finally, by taking the MSDT to be just another

Hindu temple, one neglects the unique experience that characterize Hindu Bangladeshi experiences with contemporary South Asian nationalisms.

Reflection on these points leads me to conclude with the following quote about migration and connection, by Japanese author Haruki Murakami, in *'Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage'* (2014):

> One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone. They are, instead, linked deeply through their wounds. Pain linked to pain, fragility to fragility. There is no silence without a cry of grief, no forgiveness without bloodshed, no acceptance without a passage through acute loss. That is what lies at the root of true harmony."(Murakami 86)

Similarly, the emergence of the Montreal Sanatan Dharma Temple as a community religious space has offered Hindu Bangladeshis of Montreal a venue wherein the hearts of individual members, fractured by sectarian conflict and the experience of migration, may connect as wholes. It is this connection that empowers them to assert images of their identity that honor the distinctive steps in their journey towards temple ownership—starting from their arrival in Montreal as political refugees, to the years that they participated in Indian-led congregations, and finally, to the more recent years when they have developed the skills and acquired the resources to obtain and manage an autonomous community-religious center. In sum, the MSDT is fundamentally a place of worship that is owned by a community of diasporic subjects that are religious minorities in both their old and new homelands. Moreover, the MSDT aspires to preach a universalistic creed of *sanatan dharma* or "everlasting, eternal" religion, yet still appeal to a narrower ethno-nationalist sensibility. As I have attempted to document and reflect upon in this thesis, its efforts to negotiate these demands lie at the crux of its multi-faceted avatar in contemporary Montreal.

# Ethnographic Sources

*Primary Interviews*

1. Ms. Jhumur Chakraborty

   Age: 50

   Caste: Brahmin

   Hometown: Dhaka

   Education: B.Sc (Chemistry)

   Marital Status: Divorced

   Moved to Canada: 1993

   Occupation: Barista at Tim Hortons (Rue University and Sherbrooke)

   Date of Interview: March 3, 2017

   Location: 4640 Avenue Barclay, Montréal (her residence)

2. Mr. Rithish Chakraborty

   Age: 63

   Caste: Brahmin

   Hometown: Sylhet

   Education: Higher Secondary School (Class 12)

   Marital Status: Married

   Moved to Canada: 1982

   Occupation: Full-time priest at MSDT

   Dates of Interviews: April 3, 2014 and July 11, 2017

   Location: 6219 Boulevard Monk, Montreal (MSDT)

3. Mr. Anup Kumar (Mithu) Chowdhury

   Age: 46

   Caste: Brahmin

   Hometown: Kulaura, Sylhet

   Education: High School and Certification in Real Estate

Marital Status: Married with 2 children

Moved to Canada: 1995

Occupation: Real Estate Agent

Date of Interview: March 2, 2017

Location: MSDT

4. Mr. Nabendra Das

   Age: 62

   Caste: Kayastha

   Hometown: Sunamganj, Sylhet

   Education: Bachelors in Engineering

   Marital Status: Married

   Moved to Canada: 1995

   Occupation: Retired Engineer

   Date of Interview: May 6, 2017

   Location: MSDT

5. Ms. Upasana Dasgupta

   Age: 28

   Caste: Baidya

   Hometown: Kolkata

   Education: Master of Arts Degree in International Law

   Marital Status: Engaged

   Moved to Canada: 2013

   Occupation: PhD Student at McGill University

   Date of Interview: July 8, 2017

   Location: 3474 Hutchison, Montreal (my residence)

6. Mr. Bhanu Lal Dey Chowdhury

   Age: 71

   Caste: Kayastha

Hometown: Sylhet/Kailashahar

Education: Class 12

Marital Status: Married with 3 children, and 3 grandchildren

Moved to Canada: 1976

Occupation: Retired Business owner

Date of Interview: April 3, 2017

Location: 2324 rue St. Charles, Montreal (his residence)

7. Mrs. Smita (Puja) Dey Chowdhury

   Age: 27

   Caste: Kayastha

   Hometown: Montreal

   Education: Master's in Business Administration (MBA)

   Marital Status: Married

   Occupation: Demand Manager in the Aviation Industry

   Date of Interview: April 3, 2017

   Location: 2324 rue St. Charles, Montreal (Father's residence)

8. Mrs. Sharmila Dhar

   Age: 46

   Caste: Kayastha

   Hometown: Jhalakati (Barisal)

   Education: Bachelor of Arts degree/Diploma in Nursing Assistantship

   Marital Status: Married with two children

   Moved to Canada: 1994

   Occupation: Nursing Assistant

   Date of Interview: March 23, 2017

   Location: 449 rue Berhens, Montreal (her residence)

9. Mr. Shaktibrata (Manu) Haldar

   Age: 53

Caste: Kayastha

Hometown: Maulvibazar, Sylhet

Education: Bachelor of Commerce degree/Diploma in Nursing Assistantship

Marital Status: Married with two children

Moved to Canada: 1991

Occupation: Nursing Assistant

Date of Interview: March 25, 2014

Location: my residence

10. Mr. Suddhabrata (Sudha) Haldar

    Age: 37

    Caste: Kayastha

    Hometown: Kulaura, Sylhet

    Education: Diploma in Real Estate Management

    Marital Status: Married

    Moved to Canada: 1994

    Occupation: Real Estate Agent

    Date of Interview: June 2, 2017

    Location: 138 Avenue Atwater, Montreal (Atwater Market)

11. Mr. Dileep Karmaker

    Age: 63

    Caste: Kayastha

    Hometown: Barisal

    Education: Bachelor of Arts and Diploma in Nursing Assistantship

    Marital Status: Married with 2 children

    Moved to Canada: 1995

    Occupation: Nursing Assistant

    Date of Interview: March 25, 2017

    Location: 5796 Rue Hadley, Montreal (his residence)

*Selected MSDT Field Visits for Major Calendrical Temple Events (2014-2017)*

2014 March 6: MSDT Inauguration Ceremony

2014 April 3: General Field Visit and First formal interview with Rithish Chakraborty

2014 September 29–October 3: Four visits to observe and participate in the Durga Puja festival

2015 August 1: *Satyanarayana Puja*

2015 August 2: Vedanta Society of Montreal's monthly *pathachakra*

2015 September 6: *Janmasthami* (Krishna's birth celebration)

2015 October: Ten visits for *Durga Puja* festival. I was involved in the production of a Bengali-language play that was to be staged at the temple. This required me to make very frequent visits to the MSDT over this four-week period

2015 November 15-30: Five field visits to observe everyday activities and speak informally to devotees

2015 November 9–10: Two visits to observe *Kali Puja* festival

2016 March 13: Vedanta Society of Montreal's monthly *pathachakra*

2016 May 14: Vedanta Society of Montreal's annual function

2016 September 10: *Satyanarayana Puja*

2016 October 1: *Satyanarayana Puja*

2016 September 15–October 11: 14 visits during the *Durga Puja* festival. I was again involved in the production of a Bengali-language play (this time with a more substantial role than in 2015). My involvement in rehearsals along with my independent field visits to observe the puja required me to make multiple visits over the three-week period.

2016 October 30th–November 1: Multiple visits to observe the preparations for *Kali Puja* and *Kali Puja*

2016 November 19: Vedanta Society of Montreal's monthly *pathachakra*

2016 December 3: *Satyanarayana Puja*

2016 December 23: *Sraddho* (Post-death rituals) of Mr. Nitai Basak

2016 December 26: Vedanta Society of Montreal's monthly *pathachakra*

2016 January 14, 2017: Independent visit to observe *Poush Songkrant* festival

2017 February 1-2: Two visits to observe *Saraswati Puja* rituals

2017 February 24: *Mahashivaratri*

2017 March 2: Interview with Mithu Da

2017 April 1: *Satyanarayan Puja*

2017 April 15: *Poila Boishakh* (Bengali New Year) festival

2017 May 13: Vedanta Society of Montreal's annual function

2017 July 14-15: Two visits to interview Rithish Chakraborty

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# Ethics Approval Certificate, McGill University

McGill

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**Research Ethics Board I**
**Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans**

**REB File #:** 51-0616

**Project Title**: Pran'er Mondir (Temple of my Heart): The Affective Dimensions of Religious Space in Montreal's Hindu Bangladeshi community

**Principal Investigator:** Aditya N. Bhattacharjee

**Department:** Religious Studies

**Status:** Master's Student

**Supervisor:** Prof. Andrea Pinkney

**Approval Period: September 6, 2016 to September 5, 2017**

The REB-I reviewed and approved this project by delegated review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans.

Deanna Collin
Ethics Review Administrator, REB I & II

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* All research involving human participants requires review on at least an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date. Research cannot be conducted without a current ethics approval.
* When a project has been completed or terminated, a Study Closure form must be submitted.
* Unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications must be promptly reported to the REB. Serious adverse events experienced by a participant in conjunction with the research must be reported to the REB without delay.
* Modifications must be reviewed and approved by the REB before they can be implemented.
* The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
* The REB must be notified of any suspension or cancellation imposed by a funding agency or regulatory body that is related to this project.
* The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB.