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“We Are Not All the Same”: The Differential Migration, Settlement Patterns and Housing Trajectories of Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshis in Toronto

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“As an “insider” of the South Asian community, I believe that by studying the housing experiences of this and other newly arrived immigrant groups in Canadian cities, I can provide important insights to the national housing problem - including the demand and the supply side of housing, and demonstrate the need for having a “bottom up” approach towards the study of immigrant housing experiences.”

- Sutama Ghosh

Context

The protagonists of this study are Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshis, two of the most recent immigrant arrivals in Toronto from 'South Asia'. They speak the same language (Bangla), and share a distinct colonial memory. Historically however, they have evolved into two separate socio-territorial groups: belonging to two nation states (India and Bangladesh) and adhering to different religions (Hinduism and Islam). As a result, Indian Bengalis have developed a regional identity, i.e., “Bengalis from India”, whereas Bangladeshis have a distinct national identity i.e., “Bengalis from the independent nation state of Bangladesh”. In addition, the groups label each other quite specifically - for example, Indian Bengalis identify Bangladeshis as “Bengali Muslims” (as if Islam were at the core of their identity), whereas Bangladeshis, considering themselves to be the “only” Bengali group, identify Indian Bengalis as “Indians” or “Hindus”. Such processes of self identification and

differentiation have significant ramifications for their residential settlement in Toronto.

Toronto was chosen as the study area because it provides a unique opportunity for research on ethnic minority housing. It is Canada's most important immigrant-receiving city and has a relatively expensive housing market (Murdie 2002). Toronto is also the major centre of Bangladeshi and Indian Bengali settlement in Canada.

This dissertation contends that “migration” (why and how people move internationally), “settlement patterns” (where they live within the migrant city and the associated spatial patterns) and “housing trajectories” (how they come to be there — housing availability, the housing search process and the quality, structure and cost of housing) are interconnected themes. A major objective of the study is to reveal the symbiotic relationships between these three themes.

Approach

Given the nature of the enquiry and data availability, triangulation (i.e., combining quantitative and qualitative approaches) was deemed to be the most appropriate methodology. Both secondary and primary data sources were used. Secondary data sources, including the immigrant landings (Landed Immigrant Data Set - LIDS) data, census

data and telephone directories, were used to identify the migrant flows and settlement patterns of the two groups. For migrant flows, the LIDS data provided information from 1980 to 2001 on Bangladeshi migration to Canada and Toronto more specifically. Indian Bengalis are subsumed under the larger Indian category in the LIDS data but by cross tabulating country of origin (India) and language facility (Bangla) from the LIDS data it was possible to identify Indian Bengali migrants. The LIDS data also provided some socio-demographic information on each group at time of arrival. Two data sources were used to identify, map, and analyse settlement patterns: census dissemination area data for Bangladeshis and the Canada 411 telephone directory for Indian Bengalis. For the latter, a data base of unique Indian Bengali surnames was compiled and their residential location identified using the telephone directory.

Two primary data sources were used to provide more in-depth and interpretive information for the study: key informant interviews and semi-structured interviews with a sample of sixty Bengali households (thirty from each subgroup). Both were administered face-to-face. The sixteen key informants were identified through informal conversations with Indian Bengali families, conversations with Bangladeshi business owners and internet searches. The questionnaire contained a combination of closed and open-ended questions addressing the major research themes. For example, factual questions on demography and migration were structured while questions on initial housing expectations and neighbourhood preference and satisfaction were open-ended.

To obtain a detailed summary of the housing trajectories, a grid was used for each household. In this grid, the summary results of each move, location, type and condition of dwelling, and details about the housing search process were recorded. In most cases, the formal interview ended with informal conversations about the research issues. The gist of these conversations was noted.

Results

Migration and Transnationalism

Research findings about the reasons for ('why') and processes of ('how') migration at the household level corroborated Faist's (2000) theory that the 'why' and 'how' of international migration involves the interplay of diverse factors.

- Indian Bengalis relied primarily on their institutional networks, whereas Bangladeshis usually mobilised their interpersonal

networks. For Indian Bengali 'professionals', immigration agencies played a very important role in aiding their migration to Canada. In contrast, none of the Bangladeshi respondents mentioned that an immigration agency played a role in their choice of destination country or city.

- Compared to Indian Bengalis fewer Bangladeshi men were professionally trained and fewer Bangladeshi women had a university degree. Bangladeshi refugee households were the least qualified. These differences were reflected in their employment and earnings. In contrast to all Indian Bengali men and seventy percent of the women, only half of Bangladeshi men and forty percent of the women were employed fulltime. As a result, almost half the Indian Bengali households earned more than \$75,000, whereas a similar proportion of the Bangladeshi households earned less than \$20,000, and most were on social assistance.
- These findings indicate that Indian Bengalis as a group would be better "equipped" than Bangladeshis to obtain a job and a place to live in Toronto.

Settlement Patterns

Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshis demonstrated different settlement patterns in Toronto.

- Indian Bengalis were dispersed in the Toronto CMA while Bangladeshis clustered in four neighbourhoods characterised by large and recent immigrant populations, and relatively low-cost rental high-rises.
- Bangladeshis were residentially segregated from the non-immigrant population, members of other 'South Asian' groups such as Indians and Pakistanis, and other recent immigrant groups such as Chinese and Caribbeans.
- The key informants suggested that Indian Bengalis generally do not want to live in the same neighbourhoods as Bangladeshis. Bangladeshi key informants substantiated these comments, saying that living with Indian Bengalis would not be the "first choice" for most Bangladeshis.

The findings also show that the migration process influences the settlement patterns of immigrant groups.

- Most Indian Bengalis, assisted by an immigration agency, first settled in Mississauga because the agency (run by a Punjabi-Sikh family from India) is situated there. Those who were assisted by their employers and educational institutions settled where accommodation was provided for them. The few Indian Bengalis, who came to Toronto to join family members, usually lived with them upon arrival, primarily in Scarborough.

In part, recent Indian Bengalis did not develop clustered settlement patterns because they are not chain migrants. Although Indian Bengalis have settled in Toronto since the late 1960s, most respondent households did not have prior social connections (family or friends) in Canada.

- Most Bangladeshis came to Toronto to be with friends and relatives. Since these persons lived primarily in Bangladeshi neighbourhoods, the newcomers settled in the same location, thereby adding to the existing clusters of Bangladeshis.

Housing Trajectories

The housing trajectories of the subgroups were also different.

- For example, many Indian Bengalis were homeowners at the time of the interview, thereby demonstrating a “progressive” housing trajectory.
- Most Bangladeshis were renters, and many were on the social housing waiting list. Some Bangladeshi households also had to compromise their need for larger accommodation in favour of affordability. As a result, they were living in overcrowded conditions. In terms of their housing, Bangladeshis can be best described as struggling in Toronto's housing market.

The type of assistance received in the migration process also had an impact on the initial housing situation of the Bengalis.

- Indian Bengalis aided by an immigration agency often lived in costly, overcrowded and poor quality apartments because the agencies took advantage of the newcomers' lack of knowledge and steered them into insecure, crowded and unhygienic conditions. In contrast, Indian Bengalis who had familial ties or came to Toronto through their employers were better housed.
- Compared to immigrants in the independent classification, Bangladeshi refugee claimants faced more barriers in the housing market and as a result took several years to obtain an acceptable place to live. Although some refugee households faced enormous challenges in the labour and housing markets, other households were able to overcome these barriers with the help of social networks.
- Based on when they came to Canada, Indian Bengali and Bangladeshi households had different housing experiences. Members of both subgroups who came in the early part of the 1990s stated that housing in Toronto was easy to find and relatively affordable. Most indicated that they did not face any discrimination in the housing market. In comparison, those who came in the late 1990s revealed that finding a suitable residence was “very difficult” and unaffordable. Many households who arrived at this time also perceived discrimination.

- The housing experiences of earlier arrivals also affect migration. Bangladeshis who came to Toronto in the 1980s reported that they were informed (by earlier immigrants) that affordable rental apartments were readily available in the Victoria Park area. In addition to their social ties and the presence of the Bengali enclave, this information attracted many Bangladeshis to this neighbourhood. Conversely, the difficult housing experiences of those arriving in the late 1990s may have dissuaded potential migrants to seek residence in the area.
- Likewise, housing trajectories affect settlement patterns. This study has shown that particular housing needs (e.g., to live in “mixed” neighbourhoods, nearness to place of work), along with their relatively high economic status have enabled Indian Bengalis to locate in different parts of the Toronto CMA, thereby developing a dispersed settlement pattern. Similarly, the interplay of housing aspirations (i.e., to own homes) and affordability is an important reason why many Indian Bengalis bought homes in the outer suburbs of Toronto, such as Burlington, Ajax, Oshawa, and Hamilton. On the other hand, as more Bangladeshis came to live in the low cost rental apartments of Victoria Park, or social housing in Regent Park or in the Eglinton Avenue and Markham Road areas, these Bangladeshi clusters grew in size, leading to the development of Bangladeshi businesses and institutions, and the development of ethnic enclaves.

Observations/Conclusions

Using Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) notion of the habitus it was found that immigrant households often transport locally formed habitus or 'ways of living' to the migrant city, and it is this habitus that influences their practices. This research has further nuanced this idea by revealing how people use various aspects of social and symbolic bonds to develop a habitus of place and time. For instance, by living in “mixed” multi-ethnic/cultural spaces, Indian Bengalis express and retain their multi-linguistic secular identities. In contrast, by building a Bangladeshi area within the “multicultural” space of Toronto, and by fostering attachments with the space and place of Bengalianness, the Bangladeshis are able to express and retain Bangla and Islam — the two most essential aspects of their identity. Realising that they can express who they are in Toronto, albeit in different ways, both subgroups demonstrated almost equal satisfaction with their neighbourhoods.

The preference for living in Bangladeshi enclaves, however, has severely circumscribed the housing options of the Bangladeshis, particularly with respect to the quality of their dwellings. More importantly, this has also made them vulnerable to various discriminatory practices. With increased immigration,

the vacancy rates in the rental apartments of these areas are low. Thus, it was easy to discriminate against newcomers on the pretext of level of income, source of income, or simply deny them an apartment. As a result of these barriers, many Bangladeshis were forced to accept whatever was available to them in terms of cost and quality of housing. Thus, although Bangladeshi households were able to express and retain specific aspects of their cultural identities by living in a Bengali area, the housing stock in these areas often encapsulated them in particular segments of the housing market — i.e., the private rental sector, and in apartment buildings more than five stories high.

This research has important implications for housing studies. Theoretically, it highlights the conceptual links between migration, settlement patterns and housing trajectories, hitherto considered as separate themes, and the impact of cultural identity, especially language and religion, on immigrant

settlement experiences and housing trajectories. Empirically, it challenges the perceptions of homogeneity among immigrant groups and even within seemingly well-defined groups such as 'South Asians'. It highlights the importance of disaggregating census categories and conducting research at the inter- and the intra-immigrant group levels of analysis.

Concerning housing experiences the study breaks new ground. By exploring the interconnections between transnationalism and housing experiences, it shows that immigrant housing careers are often initiated before the household arrives in the migrant city. Moreover, for some, these initial housing experiences are longer lived, and continue to influence subsequent housing experiences in terms of neighbourhoods and dwellings. The study also reveals that barriers in the housing market are often localised but cannot be simply equated to 'race'. Geopolitical contexts, especially religion, have a potentially important role to play in this regard.

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