

Ethnicity of Australians:: A debate

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Recently Tanveer Ahmed, a writer from Sydney has written an article in the daily "The New Age" of Dhaka (posted in Bangla-Sydney web-site). I would like to respond to some of his views. I have taken paragraphs from his article and respond to them sequentially.

TA: "But the ongoing spectre of terrorism and difficulties coordinating policy regarding local Muslim communities led the Treasurer and Prime Minister aspirant, Peter Costello, to announce last month that all new migrants applying for citizenship should be tested with regard to their knowledge of Australian values. What he meant by this he did not specify, but it was a thinly veiled swipe at some immigrant communities, in particular Muslim ones, who make little effort in getting to know their host country, preferring instead to live in an urban bubble of their own ethnicity."

My comment: I do not know of everything that goes on in the "ethnic" communities but isn't there a great variation in views related to ethnicity from household to household. And indeed between the first generation migrants and their second generation children who are sometimes unenthusiastic about the culture from the old country. It would be great to be unanimous about what Australian values are, so that they can be perceived in a clear-headed way.

Aren't we all living in bubbles of our own ethnicities to some extent, whether it is urban or rural? Much as we might want to deny it ancient ethnicity is determining the choice of our language, our customs, our religions and to a great extent our food. Where is the non-ethnic universal language? I suppose fast-food and burgers are non-ethnic globalised food; but I get told they are not nutritious.

Precisely which ones are universal customs? Each ethnic community has its own customs and modern Australian customs are simply an amalgamation of customs of old Europe with some components unique to this continent. Take for instance how we (Bangladeshis, whether Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Hindu) greet people. When we meet someone "Desi" are we supposed to say "Assalamualaikum?" "Nomoshkar" "G'day?" or "Hi?"; or

indeed due to the anxiety of so many options, just remain silent? And what about when we meet someone who is not of Bangladeshi origin, what do we say then? I think Americans have come close to solving this problem where everyone says “Hi” to everyone, but here we have not done that.

A Wedding is a good example whether ethnic customs meet modernity. During weddings we have colourful dresses and Gaye Halud; people of European origin normally have what we consider relatively less colorful and muted ceremonies. Does patriotic Australianness exhort us to abandon our color and sound and instead recommends weddings with minimal ceremonies and white bridal dresses similar to the customs of Northern Europe, which has now been accepted by many in East Asia. But people of Indian subcontinent has continued to maintain the old country bridal customs. Similarly there are so many customs and forgetting them all would be impossible and may not even guarantee entry in this exalted club of “Australianness”.

I think Peter Costello or any other leader of this country should clearly articulate what it means to be a modern Australian in an era of mass movement of people who are often economic migrants. Australia does need skilled economic migrants; but precisely how does Australia want these migrants to change is often not articulated clearly.

There should also be explicitly stated outcomes or rewards to follow after people make any changes. Americans often describe their nationhood as a modern entity to which anyone can belong irrespective of ethnicity or indeed accent. Such a clear articulation is lacking here leading people all in sundry to make up their minds. I have asked around widely on this issue and the response I get are not modern or illuminating. Australianness is often described as having a certain lingo or accent, or certain ethnic lineages, or having a certain mutation in body’s pigmentation system. I think we should all be very clear, non-biased, and modern in this issue and come up with a definition of Australianness that is appropriate and as far as possible removed from the requirements that would be impossible for people to change; such as accent or pigmentation. But certainly a lot of things can be changed and should be, but people are not sure precisely what needs to change

I think in the Tanveer Ahmed article there are some sweeping blames and stereotyping. For instance read this. Talking about how Bangladeshis tend not to mingle much with others he says

TA: “This is easy to do in a big global city like Sydney. All the required food shops, clothes and even health services can accommodate to the needs of most nationalities.

Bangladeshis are no exception. With their increasing numbers mean increasing opportunities to isolate themselves. Hilsha fish, ‘halal’ meat and even the university delicacy — fuska — are all readily available as are weekly ‘milads’ and meetings about the Awami League or the BNP. For some parents and elderly in particular, there is little incentive to engage with the wider country.”

My Comment: Now why these behaviours of Bangladeshis are so undesirable? And what do these behaviours such as love for Fuchka or Milad have to do with Australianness? Why should Bangladeshis forget about their taste-buds and eat Perch, or Sardines when Hilsa is available? I mean who in their right minds would opt for fried Tuna over fried Hilsa? Australia is now an exporter of Lichu (described also as Lychee), Mango and rice; very soon Fuchka might be as Australian as vegemite. These things are always evolving.

Halal food is preferred by many for religious grounds, similar to Kosher food being preferred by Jewish people. Hindus have for thousands of years avoided beef, both Muslims and Jewish people avoid pork and so on and on. I don’t think these things can be linked to any expectations of mainstream acceptability; it would not be practical or indeed appropriate to do so. We must support and respect the right of people to observe their customs as long as they do not infringe upon others rights. No one should coerce others into altering their beliefs or food habits on the ground of an expectation of a national norm.

I think engagement with greater community can occur not by abandoning these unique customs but in fact through them. There is and indeed ought to be a lot of interest in the wider community about our food, customs etc and we should invite more people in to show-case our thinking and custom. Many Bangladeshi organizations in Sydney are doing so turning Sydney into a more vibrant place than it was even a few years ago. Events of the last few months are examples of these efforts of synthesis.

So during the milads or conventions of Awami League or BNP why don't we invite Australians of other heritage. Unique tendencies of Bangladeshis to practice Bangladesh style politics in Australia get raised as an example of mal-adjustment to this community. To me it is enough to note that people want to indulge in Awami/BNP politics here; I may not agree with them totally but I support their right to do so. They must be getting something out of it. So as long as it is peaceful and lawful, let them. Such expatriate politics has always been there; in Pakistan days London was a centre of progressive Bangali politics. I think in Sydney there are a lot of talented people who are only prompted into action through the political inspiration of the old country. We need not criticize it harshly but instead try to turn it into a force of constructive change here and in Bangladesh.

TA: Comments like the Treasurers' reflect the growing concern by Western governments that many immigrants are purely economic, with little interest in merging with local tastes and customs.

In my experience, Bangladeshis are amongst the worst groups in term of remaining true to tradition and the past. The relative deprivation of Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom is as much as a testament to their inability to innovate or try new ideas as it is related to the unskilled demographics of the original migrants.

It could be argued that migrating from Bangladesh is probably one of the greatest moves in terms of going from one of the least urbanised countries to the super technological and largely atomised modern West. Hence, village rituals and the pettiness of small rural communities remain strong and are effectively transported, usually inappropriately, to their new big city life.

But the times are such that all groups, and especially those most different to the local culture, must learn to give up something of themselves to gain something of the new.

In such a rapidly changing world it is inevitable that many groups will feel insecure and will look to cling to what they have always known. Humans have always trusted tradition to give them certainty if not solutions or innovation.

My comment: Whether Bangladeshis are "worst" or "best" for remaining true to their heritage is a subjective judgement. It depends on whether one values the old customs as something that has shaped us and also inspire us into our future, or whether one sees them as useless habits of antiquity to be purged with sweeping currents of modernity. That judgement is a personal

one and individuals and families are dealing with this question in diverse ways.

For us as a family, remaining linked to our Bangali identity is of high importance and this is something we try very hard to pass on to our son. This identity includes language, taste of food, link with the history of the land, its unique pathos of songs and poetry, and belief systems infused by a syncretic amalgamation of many religions of our land. These efforts of preserving our “bangalitto” need not be pitted against acquiring an Australian identity or a love for Australian Nationhood. Indeed the only way I can be of any value to Australia would be through my mind which has been shaped by Bangladesh.

But coming back to the questions raised by Tanveer Ahmed what should Bangladeshis as well as other migrants do? Stop having Halal food, or Fuchka? How would that help anyway? Let us say for arguments sake that Bangladeshis do remain true to their past much more than people of other Nationalities. How are we to change that? If Bangladeshis stopped observing Ekushey February or Pahela Baishakh, would Australia become more prosperous or more secure? I think Tanveer Ahmed seems to be blaming people for wanting to celebrate their old culture, without saying why they should not do so or indeed what would be the rewarding outcomes of not doing so.

The story of Bangalis in UK is a very mixed one and there is a lot of focus on the ones who have not succeeded or adjusted well. I have also met UK Bangalis who have been successful and have blended in after denying their ethnicity; but often they are not really happy about it and show their lack of happiness through unnecessary aggressiveness to the “ethnic” culture of their parents. It is too early to say whether such rejection is a good thing.

It is not true that Village-living Bangladeshis are coming to Australian cities and becoming disoriented by city life. Most Bangladeshis who have come here are quite familiar and used to living in cities and some of them are even living in rural Australia, so the flow is opposite to what Tanveer Ahmed describes. I know of some city people from Bangladesh living in rural hinterlands of Australia. But of course they are bringing in their ethnicity, religion and customs with them, as the Croatians, Slavs, Italians, and Scottish people brought their respective ethnicities through generations.

I see pettiness in cities and breadth and openness in villages as well as the opposite described by Tanveer Ahmed. If there is pettiness in the Bangladeshi migrant community in Australia let us not blame Bangladeshi villages for that. Those villages are yet to send their children in significant numbers to Australian cities.

TA: clinging to old ideas of marriage, education and career or even religious devotion will be severely tested by modernity. The information revolution and the process it has triggered which is commonly called globalisation has not only altered our methods of production, but its deeper effects on social life and the way we see ourselves and each other are beginning to be felt. The most ignorant response to such a monumental shift is to retreat into the security of tradition and authority. The current emphasis on social policy in the West in terms of emphasising local customs, while decried as authoritarian and discriminatory, is justifiable. It is impossible to socialise very different groups unless there are tight common strains. What we term multiculturalism depends on all of us giving up something of our past. It is necessary to loosen our grip on what we thought we were in favour of investing in what we can be. This is true whether we live in Sydney, Baghdad or Dhaka.

My comment: How would a nation legislate, coerce and engineer how people chose to marry is not clear to me. And even if people were to be encouraged to marry in a particular way I am not sure how things would get better simply because of that. Mate choice has its own dynamics and better be left to individuals and families. For instance I do not think even in distant future Australia is likely to ban traditionally arranged marriages. Those marriages still exist but even in Bangladesh are becoming extinct. Religious devotion has remained the business of an individual for thousands of years and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

I am not sure that every “western” country is wanting to tell their migrants to “shape-up” or “ship out”, as implied by that article. If the attitude of the second generation children of migrants is any indication they need not do any of that; they should simply wait for the memories and pathos of the old country to die out.

Conclusion: Finally I do agree that we need to change. But all of us, whether recent migrants or temporally more ancient migrants, all of us

should change. We should change through a process of interaction, discussion, debate and finally an agreement. That agreement should be a charter of the future course of our Australian Nationhood.

We as Australians have the responsibility to say what kind of Australians we want to be within the fabric of Australian law and polity as much as being told what kind of Australians we should be. Through such a dialog a sustainable common strain of Nationhood is important to articulate for the well-being of this nation.

Though I do not agree to everything he has to say I congratulate Tanveer Ahmed to initiate this debate. I hope others will now join in this dialog.