CAF America’s Voices of Diaspora interview series presents diasporans living in the US and Canada who share their views on heritage, culture, and being part of a diaspora group.

**CAF America:** What does it mean to you to be a member of the Bangladeshi Diaspora?

**Fahim Mohammad:** Initially, it was like living in two different universes: with two addresses, two languages, two currencies, and two postal codes. Over time, the line between the two worlds slowly became more blurred. Being a member of the Bangladeshi diaspora, to me, is the ability to see your country from an outside perspective which leads to appreciating your roots even more than before, while also feeling comfortable in your new home country.

**CAF America:** How do you engage with your culture and heritage?

**FM:** Being a first generation Bangladeshi diasporan, engaging with my culture and heritage is in my blood; and doing so makes me feel complete as a person. Thankfully, in a country like Canada, where multiculturalism is celebrated and welcomed with open arms, it’s easy to do so. Canada has given us the opportunity to keep our identities; we can take pride in our ancestry and still have a sense of belonging. So much so, that I am lucky enough to make engaging with the Bangladeshi culture part of my everyday life and my career. Food is central to our culture, and as the owner of Chawk Bazar—a Bangladeshi restaurant here in Toronto—I have the opportunity to remain in touch with my culture almost every second of the day, even on the days that I don’t want to!

**CAF America:** How about Bangladesh? Do you have close ties back to your home community? Do you know if other members of the Bangladeshi diaspora remain closely connected with their family and friends in Bangladesh?

**FM:** Yes! I have strong ties to my home country. My parents reside there, and I make it a point to go back to Bangladesh at least once or twice a year. I believe the majority of the Bangladeshi diaspora has ties to Bangladesh. We often make it a point to uphold our cultural values and practices that represent our country and its people the best way possible in a foreign land.

**CAF America:** Next, could you share with us your opinion on how the Bangladeshi diaspora can contribute to the development of Bangladesh?

Fahim Mohammad came to Canada in 2005 as an international student from Bangladesh.

Now residing in Toronto, Fahim has worked in the hospitality industry since 2012; owning and operating two popular restaurants in that time frame.

Fahim is a graduate of the University of Toronto, having received his B.A. in 2009 double-majoring in Human Resources and Political Science.
FM: The Bangladeshi diaspora plays an integral part in the development of Bangladesh. According to the World Bank, in 2018 remittances account for 5.5% percent of the country's GDP. Remittances help increase the foreign currency reserve of Bangladesh and contribute to alleviating poverty, which has decreased significantly in the past few decades (from 82% poverty rate in 1972 to 24% in 2018). These are not utopian figures, but present a clear case of how the people of Bangladesh and its diaspora are helping to bring millions of lives out of poverty. Sending money to Bangladesh, no matter how small the contribution is, creates a multiplier effect, and that very contribution becomes that much more valuable in the long run. Moreover, a Bangladeshi diasporan also has the responsibility to represent the country outside its borders in the best way possible; create much-needed awareness, mobilize resources, and give back!

CAF America: Could you describe some ways in which the community there in Toronto directly engages with Bangladesh? Are there any fundraising activities that you know of?

FM: I feel like the community here in Toronto is very much in touch with the affairs of Bangladesh. Every time there's a cultural event, they go all in; they hire concert halls or even stadiums to celebrate some of the national holidays of Bangladesh. If you were to be in Bangladesh during a national holiday, people would dress up and have all sorts of food, and here, it's nothing short of that. We celebrate the same way, except for the fact that the temperature is a bit different, but that doesn't stop us. And I've also noticed that whenever there's some sort of a fundraising event—whether related to the Rana Plaza building collapse, the flooding during the Monsoon season, or the Rohingya crisis—I see a lot of Facebook posts that are being circulated within Canada, trying to mobilize the people to help out in any way they can. The diaspora community here is very active. Most often, I see some sort of collective action on the very next day after an event; at minimum, there will be some group of friends trying to gather funds.

CAF America: As a young professional, do you have an advantage that you might be able to utilize to advance this cause?

FM: Given its geographical location, size, and the massive population, Bangladesh is at a disadvantage to start off. Dire poverty, unemployment, natural calamities, and limited resources are all hindering the growth of the country. There is no easy fix for these problems. While young professionals who are part of the educated workforce realize that our contributions can help enormously, in most cases we do not know where to start and how to best proceed. As much as one wants to be on the ground in Bangladesh, it is sometimes not possible, nor are we able to tackle a problem alone. Luckily, there are initiatives like the Diaspora Gives Bangladesh who help to bridge this gap for us. In the age of technology, mobilizing resources, building awareness, fundraising, and donating to credible organizations has become much easier and more secure.

CAF America: As we discuss how the diaspora can affect change, what role can diaspora philanthropy play?

FM: Being away from your roots is never easy. You may be physically far away, but your homeland is ever-present. You are who you are today—no matter where you are—due to your roots. In that regard, Diaspora and philanthropy go hand in hand. There is a saying “absence makes the heart grow fonder—and possibly more patriotic!” If it's within your means, you will always try to do something good, and I believe this to be true with every Bangladeshi diasporan. “A Bangladeshi Diasporan, not only plays an enormous role in contributions, but also has the responsibility to represent the country outside its borders in the best way possible, create much needed awareness, mobilize resources, and give back!”

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