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A BIDESHI CALLED ITALY

Migration from Bangladesh to Italy and Beyond

Francesco Della Puppo

Today, Italy is one of the most important destinations of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the West, with Rome hosting the second largest Bangladeshi community in Europe, after London. Although the Bangladeshi community has only become established in the country in the last 30 years, it has grown with unprecedented speed and intensity. This is the result of the intermingling of the social changes that Italy has undergone within the context of Mediterranean Europe (Piron et al. 2009) and the profound political and economic transformations of post-independence Bangladesh, which has become a protagonist on the world stage (Piron, 2012; Van Schendel, 2009).

This chapter deals with Bangladeshi migration to Italy. It will analyse the class composition and aspirations of Bangladeshi migrants, the familyisation process of this migration in Italy, which, through family reunification, increased the number of women and the so-called "second generation" in the country. Finally, it will analyse the impact of the economic crisis on the social family and migratory trajectories of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy, many of whom have become Italian citizens in the meantime, acquiring European passports and, in increasing numbers, relocating to the United Kingdom, but mostly to London.

Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers' to Reach the Shores of the Mediterranean

Bangladeshi migration to Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the mid-1970s Italy was mainly a country of emigration and only since 1976 it has also become a country of immigration. Since the mid-1970s the number of Italian workers and families leaving the country was broadly reduced both for external reasons – contraction in the demand for industrial labour by the main European economies after the first oil crisis of 1973 – and for internal reasons – the improvement of the country's living conditions, especially in the southern regions, due to economic growth in industry and agriculture, as well as an increase in employment in the public sector and in social security income for older workers (Pugliese, 2006).

Many Bangladeshis arrived in the country in the 1980s, which was also due to the closure of other European countries' borders, mainly France, Switzerland, and the Federal Republic of Germany – an example, in the words of King and Knights (1994), of "migratory opportunism" – combined

with the political turbulence and the deep economic and social transformations happening in Bangladesh at the time.

The Federal Republic of Germany was one of the most popular destinations for the Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe—after the United Kingdom, the ex-colonial motherland—as it was relatively easy to obtain political asylum there in the years following the 1975 coup in Bangladesh that led to a military dictatorship by Ziaur Rahman and his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (Van Schendel, 2009). In 1979 the German government imposed new restrictions on asylum and so migration flows moved to France due to its relatively welcoming attitude towards political refugees. Furthermore, the election of a socialist president to the Elysée Palace in 1981 gave migrants hope that they would be granted amnesty quickly, attracting even more Bangladeshi migrants to the country. In comparison to countries like Germany and Switzerland, that moved from being “easy targets” to “impenetrable fortresses” in a matter of years, France had relatively permissive legislation, at least until 1989 when Interior Minister Charles Pasqua cracked down on migrants entering the country (Priori, 2012).

In the same period the First Gulf War broke out, which made it impossible to migrate to most of the Middle Eastern oil producing countries. These changes reversed the migration flows to Mediterranean Europe and the Soviet Bloc. The collapse of “real socialism” made Eastern European countries open to immigration. Relations between these countries and Bangladesh were strong, since the first two socialist governments of the *Awami League*—the political party of the first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman, who led the struggle for national independence from Pakistan, which was gained in 1971—established scholarships through which thousands of young Bangladeshis went to the Soviet Union or to other Warsaw Pact countries to attend university (Priori, 2012). Many of them stayed in these countries to pursue business activities after the implosion of the Soviet Union, creating large compatriot communities. The economic stagnation at the dawn of the post-Soviet era and the growing racism against migrants in large Russian cities as well as inspiring talk of the possibilities for economic growth in the new destinations of Mediterranean Europe, meant that many Bangladeshis left Russia for Spain, Greece, and, especially, Italy.²

A Bidesh³ Called Italy, An Adam Bepari Called Rome

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the presence of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy remained negligible and concentrated in the capital: very often they were migrants in transit (with the hope of moving on to other European countries or to Canada or the United States) and were always “pioneers.” Their economic capitals, initially made it a kind of elite migration of wealthy people who had been landowners or industry leaders in Bangladesh, mortgaging or selling their houses to move abroad.

Bangladeshis make up the sixth largest national non-EU migrant community in Italy (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2022). Although Bangladeshis first arrived in the 1970s, when Italy was transitioning from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration, it was in the 1980s that they started arriving in larger numbers, and in the 1990s that Italy became an important destination. The data makes this clear: following the 1986 amnesty (Law 943/86, the so-called “Martelli law”) only around 100 Bangladeshi citizens were granted residence permits; following the 1990 amnesty (Law 39/90) that number rose to almost 4,000 (King & Knight, 1994; Knights, 1996; 1998; Knight & King, 1998); and it rose significantly again to more than 70,000 in the early 2000s (Priori, 2012; Zeitlyn, 2006). Today the Bangladeshi community in Italy consists of 139,000 migrants (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2022).

The territorial distribution of Bangladeshis was far from homogeneous: until the end of the 1990s they were concentrated almost exclusively in Rome where, according to the 1991 census, 92% of them lived (King & Knight, 1994; Knights, 1996; 1998; Knight & King, 1998), mainly working as street-hawkers (Knights & King, 1998).

At that time the number of Bangladeshis settling in the capital—encouraged by effective migration networks connecting their country of origin with various poles of the diaspora in Europe and Italy—was growing so fast that the Bangladeshi community in Rome became one of the largest in Europe, second only to London.

Rome was the place of first passage, in which Bangladeshis could meet, if not friends and acquaintances, then at least their compatriots, and be informed about the latest opportunities for working or living in Italy or other European states. The city is still considered one of the so-called “*Adam Beparis*,” a hub for the sorting and dispersal of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the world (Knights, 1996; Priori, 2012; Priori et al., 2021; Zeitlyn, 2006).

Indeed, a large city like Rome was immensely attractive to migrants both due to the presence of their compatriots—the pioneers of this migration—who offered strong networks and the first point of support to newcomers, and the fascinating imagery it evoked among the middle-class educated youth of the world’s peripheries. However, the main reason was that it was attractive because of the work opportunities it offered in the informal economy (services, catering, tourism, small businesses etc.) and the possibility of those without a valid residence permit passing unnoticed within the dense mesh of the community, itself only a small part of the metropolis.

The Changing Profile of Bangladeshi Immigrants in Italy

The Bangladeshi community that became established in the 1990s has its own economic and labour structure, the result of conditions imposed by Italy in the 1990s. Entrepreneurs, subordinate workers and, finally, street vendors, were the three groups in which migrants present on Italian soil could be traced. Already by the end of 1991, the entrepreneurs—a numerical minority mainly made up of political leaders and associations—opened shops and establishments aimed at meeting the demands of the community. These included import-export activities (to supply other Bangladeshis in the retail trade), phone centres, food, clothing, jewellery, or DVD retailers. As well as being meeting places, they were indispensable points in which to obtain information on bureaucracy, the Italian language, services, jobs, or housing. The large group of wage workers is also important, not only because of their numbers, but because they provide a “protective umbrella” for those without work or residence permits. Furthermore, many Bangladeshis find employment by providing so-called migration services to their compatriots, such as helping them find accommodation, work, food, low-cost telephone calls or the Internet, or by becoming intermediaries in the *hundi* or *hawala* system in order to send remittances back home without using official channels (Zeitlyn, 2006).

In this way, the migratory networks that unite Bangladeshi people in Italy become more deeply established, with migration being seen as an attractive project for increasingly wide and more diverse layers of Bangladeshi society. Compared to the 1980s and early 1990s, in which only an elite eager to raise their social status migrated, now migrants also include people from the middle class and even the lower-middle class in Bangladesh, made up of small traders and farmers. Although those at the bottom of the social scale (in terms of access to resources) are precluded from migrating, many nevertheless aspire to migrate. Previous studies have identified the presence of migrants in Italy who belong not so much to the traditional middle class, as to a class of people who have achieved average incomes thanks to migration and the consequent remittances (Gardner, 1995; Priori, 2012).

The wages earned by Bangladeshis abroad, or by those working in migration-related businesses, have increased people's earnings and their interest in migration to the West, often idealised as a cradle of wealth and freedom due to social remittances and the "anticipatory socialisation" of migration. This helps to create high expectations in those who leave, which are often quickly crushed when they land at their destination. Instead of being landowners with capital to invest in migration, with educated children and a willingness to take risks (Knights, 1996, 1998; Priori, 2012; Zeitlyn, 2006), Bangladeshi people who have migrated to Italy in the twenty-first century appear to have originally been of low socio-economic status (of rural origin and not always particularly well educated). It was often the *probashi*'s⁴ migratory experiences in the Middle East where they tended to work in construction or as industrial workers, which allowed them to make the same investments and take the same risks as the urban middle class. In this way they reached a level of economic wealth and knowledge of the world that made certain European destinations like Italy and Spain accessible.

The 1990s were also characterised by a *fragmentation* of the Bangladeshi community and the *dispersion* of many *probashi* across the country. Those without documents tended to stay longer in the capital, as they depended on the support of the Bangladeshi community. Conversely, those that finally got regular residence permits left the capital in order to achieve better social, working, and living conditions (Knights, 1996; Zeitlyn, 2006), carrying out a "migration within migration" within the country. Thus, various "Bangla-towns" sprung up in various provincial areas, offering opportunities to settle close to major industrial centres in northern regions with vast employment opportunities, especially in the northeast of the country—which appeared to be a particularly prosperous area at the time—where they found jobs in factories and workshops. So, while the capital still attracts a large number of Bangladeshi people (Casu, 2008; Pompeo, 2011, 2012), many of them are moving to other Italian cities, creating their own ethnic enclaves or "Bangla-towns" (Della Puppa, 2014; Della Puppa and Gelati, 2015).

The Establishment and Familiarisation of Bangladeshi Immigration in Italy

The first generation of *probashi* in Italy was made up of young single people from the upper-middle classes who had a higher education qualification. They were the children of lawyers, landowners, teachers, entrepreneurs, public administration employees, military officers, and managers that grew up in wealthy families in post-independence Bangladesh and that are today working as unskilled workers, inclined to work overtime and under low-profile contracts. Bangladeshi migrants employed in low-skilled jobs in the industrial or service sector in Italy were not working class in their country of origin; the work they do in Italy "they would never dream of doing in their home country" (Zeitlyn, 2006, p. 32). Migration is a *socially selective process*: it costs money (it is estimated that migrating from Bangladesh to Italy requires an investment of about €8,000–10,000) and, therefore, requires the investment/possession of capital (primarily economic capital, but also cultural and social capital). As a result it is accessible only to members of the upper or middle classes who have access to that capital, and certainly not to most subaltern classes (Della Puppa and Ambrosini, 2021). Their experience of international migration is thus not as a desperate escape from hunger and misery, but as a family strategy to engage in upward social mobility both for themselves and for their household—especially through remittances. Migration therefore reproduces and reinforces the conditions that make migration possible, increasing the social and class positions of those who can afford it.

Furthermore, in the early 1990s the Bangladeshi community in Italy was still composed almost exclusively of men (Montuori, 1997; Casu, 2008), with women being almost completely absent.

The presence of women has increased over the years with the establishment of the Bangladeshi community in Italy. However, among the first generations of migrants from Bangladesh to Italy, there were hardly any women who independently attempted to migrate to Southern Europe, with the small number of women coming to Italy almost exclusively through the process of family reunification. Thus, in the first phase of Bangladeshi migration to Italy family reunifications are configured exclusively as “male” reunifications, as well as “second level” or “newly established” reunifications in which the first migrant man returns to their country of origin to get married once the necessary conditions have been created. This is most often done through an arranged marriage with a woman who, immediately afterwards, is reunited in the destination country. If from the point of view of the immigrant society (in Italy), such a couple would constitute a reunited family, from the point of view of the emigrant society (in Bangladesh), the family only begins to take shape with the release of documents confirming that there is no impediment to reunification. This event thus represents the joining of two spouses who begin an experience of co-residence and conjugality in their country of immigration and that often only begin to get to know each other from that moment (Della Puppa, 2014, 2018).

Due to these family reunifications, Bangladeshi migration to Italy thus went through a process of consolidation, stabilisation, and familiarisation, followed by the birth of the so-called “second generations.”

...And One Day They all Moved to *Londoni*

The first generation of Bangladeshis who arrived in Italy between the 1990s and 2000s thus became more firmly established, with stronger material, social, and family situations. However, over the years, the economic, and social face of Italy changed and Bangladeshi migrants’ legal status evolved, along with their duties and aspirations. In fact, the global economic crisis has particularly hit Mediterranean Europe—such as Italy—damaging the possibilities of upward social mobility for working-class families and their children, especially those with a migrant background (Priori et al., 2021). At the same time, Bangladeshi migrants now have to take responsibility for their children born in Italy, and, after more than 15–20 years living in Italy, have often acquired Italian citizenship for themselves. If, for some, Italian citizenship represents the last step in the process of becoming settled in Italy, for others, on the contrary, it is the key to accessing migratory mobility on a European level and beyond. In fact, with an Italian passport—and, therefore, a European one—“Italian *probashi*” can now migrate within the European space without requiring entry visas.

This can be described as a process of “onward migration,” which describes, for example, the migratory reactivation of those from third countries who, once they have acquired citizenship in an EU country in Southern Europe, move towards Central and Northern European countries. From about 2010 onwards, this effectively translated into an onward migration process oriented in almost all cases towards the United Kingdom, a context generically defined as “*Londoni*.”⁵

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2017) reports that, of the 29,000 Italians originating from a non-European country who left Italy in 2016 alone (a figure up by 19% compared to the previous year), over 2,500 were of Bangladeshi origin. The destination of the latter can be deduced from the data showing that 92% of Italians of Asian origin who emigrate move to the United Kingdom, and from the fact that more than 30,000 Italian Bangladeshis are estimated to live in the United Kingdom (Chowdhury, 2018). This would confirm that the “former colonial centres” are still considered attractive to citizens originating from the “peripheries,” as well as reinforcing the general picture of an acceleration in emigrations from Italy to the United Kingdom which, again according to Istat data, rose particularly sharply in 2016, going from 17,000 to 25,000 (+42%).

The phenomenon of “onward migration” has been studied in relation to different nationalities of migrants in Europe (Ahrens, 2013; Ahrens et al., 2016; Della Puppa et al. 2021; Haandrikman & Haasvanen, 2014; Kelly, 2013; King & Karamoschou, 2019; Mas Giralt, 2017; Mollwaine & King, 2019; Ortensi & Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2018; Ramos, 2018; van Liempt, 2011) and there is much research on the specific case of the mass onward migration of Italian-Bangladeshi people to the United Kingdom and, more particularly, to London (Della Puppa, 2018, 2021; Della Puppa & King, 2019; King & Della Puppa, 2021) This specific onward migration (Della Puppa, 2018; Della Puppa & King, 2019) is the product of a combination of individual factors, collective histories, and more or less idealised representations of the British context.

First of all, we can identify a common motive for this new migration: the aspiration of Bangladeshi migrants for upward social mobility for their children and to invest in the future of new generations. In Bangladeshi perceptions and representations, staying in Italy would carry the risk that their children followed their professional and existential trajectory as low-profile workers locked into subordinate sectors of the labour market. Parents believe that if their children do not learn good English it will be a problem for them in building future prospects outside of Italy, particularly if they want to return to Bangladesh. Thus London is considered more attractive than Italy due to the desire for their children to be socialised and educated in English, which they see as essential in the international labour market and for potential future geographical mobility over national borders. Education in English is also identified as a status symbol that only higher-class people in Bangladesh can afford. Therefore moving to the United Kingdom is understood as an investment in the future.

London is represented—not without a certain amount of idealisation—as the global and multicultural city par excellence and providing opportunities and a meritocracy that allows young people of all national origins to enhance their skills and potential. This representation of the British capital is linked, on the one hand, to the historic role of London as the capital of the British Empire and, therefore, of institutions and values nostalgically considered to still be in force and, on the other, to the presumed dominance of multiculturalism which—precisely by virtue of the country’s colonial past and the long tradition of immigration from former colonies—is seen as contributing to the construction of a society in which no-one is stigmatised or discriminated against due to their “ethno-racial” belonging, national origin, religious faith, or other linguistic and cultural elements.

The lack of meritocracy was an issue that had already emerged in the representations of the limits of Italian society, especially in relation to the labour market. Reinforcing this narrative is the shared representation of London as a context in which social fulfilment based on one’s own abilities and qualifications is possible, regardless of ascribed social membership. The long migratory tradition that has linked the Indian subcontinent to the colonial homeland since the seventeenth century and which allowed for the creation of the oldest and largest Bangladeshi “community” outside of Bangladesh has meant that London is perceived as “a small Bangladesh in Europe.” It is seen as a context in which it is possible to “feel at home” and to live in accordance with what the respondents define as “the Bengali culture and lifestyle.”

The possibility of being able to express their religious affiliation with greater freedom in the public domain, to enter into a wider community of Muslims and, above all, to guarantee a religious education for their children, also acts as a fundamental drive towards this new migration.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom is also perceived as more attractive than Italy due to its welfare system, which is considered to be more inclusive than that in the Mediterranean area.

Italian Bangladeshis point out that being Italian “on paper” is not a sufficient condition for protecting them from the discrimination and inequalities that many of them experience every day in Italian society and especially in the Italian labour market. They perceive and describe Italian

society as still unprepared to include citizens of different “ethnic-cultural” backgrounds or of different national origins and implicitly express their aspiration to live in a more cosmopolitan social context and, above all, in a more inclusive labour market.

Finally, one reason for onward migration towards the United Kingdom is the dissatisfaction of reunited women with their lives in Italy. In fact, family reunification created sharply gendered emotional differences. While already-settled men were able to (re)construct their emotional universe of family togetherness by bringing their wives and children to Italy, for the women, this “trailing spouse” or arranged marriage migration was “imposed,” forcing them to abandon their kinship and relational networks in Bangladesh and to suffer the social and emotional downgrading of a move from the Global South to the Global North. Thus, their husbands may feel guilty because they feel as if they forced their wives to be socially downgraded and to experience loneliness, isolation, and exclusion from the parental and family circles, creating significant divergences between the expectations, aspirations, and emotions of the men and women in a reunited family. These gaps can lead to conflict between different emotional logics and can lead to the reshaping and transforming of the migratory trajectories of Italian-Bangladeshi migrant families, towards the United Kingdom for instance.

Those Italian Bangladeshis who have relocated to London have in some sense realised their dream and in some sense been disappointed, finding an unexpected dark side to their new migration (Della Puppa & King, 2019; Morad et al., 2021; King & Della Puppa, 2021). Although many have decided to retrace their steps, returning to Italy (Della Puppa & Morad, forthcoming), most have (permanently) settled in the British capital, even acquiring British citizenship.

Conclusions

Over a period of 50 years, Italy has experienced a process of social transformation of epochal importance due to global migratory dynamics. Since becoming a unified nation, about 25 million people have left the country for the rest of the world, which is equal to its entire population in 1861—the year of its unification. In 1973 it also started to become a country of increased immigration, but this did not mean that outgoing movement and internal migration ceased: this is why some authors (e.g., Pugliese, 2006) describe Italy as a “migratory crossroad.”

However, in those same years, international migratory dynamics changed, with new peoples and new countries entering the world scene with great impetus. Among these was Bangladesh, a young nation that won its independence in 1971, exactly when Italy was changing its “migration status.”

Within 20 years, Italy would be the home of a real diaspora of global reach, that of Bangladeshi migrants (Alexander et al., 2016; Kibria, 2011), with Rome hosting one of the most important *probashi* communities in Europe, second only to that of London (Adams, 1987; Gardner, 1995).

Moreover, between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the evolution of immigration from Bangladesh to the Italian capital and other minor Italian cities and towns that would also become hubs for the Bangladeshi diaspora, demonstrate the “almost general rule” of migration phenomena, which sees “family immigration” as the spontaneous evolution of “immigration for work” (Sayad, 2006).

However, soon after the rapid establishment of the Bangladeshi community in Italy, the effects of the economic crisis—which were particularly virulent in Mediterranean Europe—and the new aspirations of the first generation of Bangladeshis in Italy, meant the community began to consider more prestigious and idealised hubs of the diaspora in Europe, primarily the United Kingdom. Thus Italy regained its (never completely abandoned) role as a “transit” country and “migratory crossroads.”

The subjective and objective motives underlying this reactivation of migratory mobility allow us to outline, by contrast, migrants' representations and perceptions of Italy as a deeply impoverished country in social, economic, and productive crisis, and as a society crossed, at all levels, by discriminatory and exclusionary drives, unable to achieve multiculturalism and creating an informal, but real stratification along "ethnic-national" lines. They point out that it is characterised by: a political and media system that paints immigrants and their families as inferior and prevents them from any upward mobility; a labour market that segregates workers of non-Italian origin into the lowest, worst paid, most strenuous, and dangerous sectors; a school and university system that systematically excludes and marginalises pupils belonging to the so-called "second—and third—generations"; and a welfare state which, in addition to being subject to a process of radical dismantling, is, once again, particularly exclusionary of people of immigrant origin.

Thus the "mirror function" of immigration already identified by Sayad (2006) emerges clearly revealing the deepest contradictions of a society, its political organisation, and its relations with other societies.

In addition to the mirror metaphor, the photographic metaphor is useful. In fact, the migration trajectory began between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s that linked Bangladesh to Italy and which radiated out from Italy to the United Kingdom, provides only a snapshot of the last 30 years of migrations of the Bangladeshi diaspora, which is much older and larger (Alexander et al., 2016; Priori et al., 2021; Samaddar, 1999). The reconstruction reported here took place in the aftermath of Brexit which is redesigning the internal balances of Europe, and the pandemic which is radically reconfiguring economic, social, political, health, and demographic structures at a global level. Added to this are the effects of environmental devastation and climate change which are emerging in an increasingly clear and violent way across the planet and that put Bangladesh in a particularly vulnerable position. How these will shape the migration movements involving Bangladesh and Europe, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and redesign the trajectories of the *probashi*, is yet to be seen.

Notes

1. *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* is the evocative title of the monograph by Caroline Adams (1987), which was devoted to life stories of the Bangladeshi pioneers in the United Kingdom. It was used again in Italy by postcolonial fiction writers (Ali, 2003) and by some diaspora observers (Priori, 2012).
2. Southern European countries, that are European countries of "recent" immigration, offering still relatively good working and social conditions and wages, in virtue—especially in Italy—of a growing labour market, of the structural importance of the shadow economy and of the instrumentally lax immigration policies.
3. In the Bangla language, it literally means "foreign land," "abroad," as opposed to *Bangla-desh*, "The country, the land where Bangla is spoken."
4. In Bangladesh, the emigrants are called *probashi*, which means "external inhabitants" or "those who went abroad."
5. This term derives from one of the first main destinations in the history of migration from Bangladesh: London and, by extension, the whole of the United Kingdom. In the same way, Bangladeshi villages also characterised by a high percentage of emigrants are defined as "Londoni" (Gardner, 1995).

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