

Associations of New Italians Abroad: Italian Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom

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Received 19 May 2025 | Accepted 3 March 2026 |

Published online 20 July 2026

Abstract

Given Italy's long history as a country of emigration, sociological literature has traditionally focused extensively on the associations of Italian emigrants abroad rather than on those of foreign migrants in the country. However, since 1973—when Italy began transitioning into a country primarily of immigration—new forms of migrant association began to emerge. At the same time, since Italy has never entirely ceased to be a country of emigration, and given the intensification of Italian out-migration since 2008, we also find the emergence of association practices among the so-called 'new Italians abroad': that is, migrants who have resided in Italy long enough to acquire Italian citizenship and who have then emigrated from Italy to another European country. This article focuses on the association of Italian-Bangladeshis in London and elsewhere in the UK: the strengths of these organisations, the challenges they face, the activities they promote and the aims that guide them.

Keywords

migrant associations – onward migration – Italian-Bangladeshi – London – citizenship

1 Introduction

The creation of associations is one of the main citizenship practices of people living as immigrants in foreign countries. As a response to the need for social interaction, it is perhaps secondary only to religious practices and, sometimes, trade union activity.¹ Furthermore, being part of an association—with other people from the same country, region or faith—acts as a bridge to the destination society, with its institutions, population groups, political groups and associations. It also affects the way that immigrants understand their own positioning and identities in society.² For these reasons, the associations created by immigrant people—and, to an extent, their participation in previously existing local associations—has been the focus of many scientific studies. Italy has long been a country of emigration,³ with over 24 million Italians emigrating since its unification, equal to its entire population in 1861.⁴ Due to this fact, sociological literature has traditionally focused on the associations created by Italian immigrants abroad.⁵

Since 1973, when the number of immigrants first exceeded the number of those emigrating from the country, it soon became clear that immigrants to Italy were also creating associations, a phenomenon that has attracted the

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- 1 M. Ambrosini and L. Frangi, 'Introduction. Work, Trade Unions, and Migrations: Insights and Challenges in Different Countries', *Mondi Migranti*, 1 (2015), 33–42; P. Basso, 'Sul rapporto tra immigrati e sindacati', in *Diversity management e società multiculturale*, eds. L. Mauri and L. Visconti (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004), 1–18; F. Della Puppa, 'Sindacato, lavoratori immigrati e discriminazioni razziali nell'Italia della crisi', *Mondi Migranti*, 2 (2018), 117–147.
 - 2 P. Attanasio, 'Gli stranieri e l'associazionismo come motore di integrazione: Un'indagine in provincia di Bolzano', *Dialoghi Mediterranei*, 59 (2023), <https://www.istitutoeuroarabo.it/DM/gli-stranieri-e-lassociazionismo-come-motore-di-integrazione-unindagine-in-provincia-di-bolzano/>.
 - 3 E. Pugliese, *L'Italia tra migrazioni internazionali e migrazioni interne* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006).
 - 4 P. Basso, 'Gli immigrati in Italia e in Europa', in *Educare diversamente*, ed. D. Santarone (Rome: Armando, 2006), 81–99.
 - 5 F. Bertagna, 'L'associazionismo in America Latina', in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana: Arrivi*, eds. P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi and E. Franzina (Rome: Donzelli, 2002), 579–609; S. Bugiardini, 'L'associazionismo negli USA', in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 551–577; M. Colucci, 'L'associazionismo di emigrazione nell'Italia repubblicana', in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 415–429; S. Palidda, *Mobilità umane: Introduzione alla sociologia delle migrazioni* (Milan: Cortina, 2008); S. Palidda, 'Socialità e associazionismo degli immigrati', in *Migrazioni*, eds. P. Corti and M. Sanfilippo (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

attention of social scientists.⁶ On the one hand, the last two decades of increased immigration to Italy (due to its size, diversity, stability, the role of women, and its high level of self-organisation)⁷ has led to the development of a huge variety of associations, which also include so-called second and third generations.⁸ On the other hand, however, since Italy has continued to be a country of emigration, and since, from 2008 onwards, there has been an increase in the number of those moving away leading to the emergence of a 'new Italian emigration',⁹ the associations created by Italians abroad have changed form, with new trends and characteristics emerging.

Included in this process of evolution and change are the associations established by 'new Italians abroad': that is, by those immigrants to Italy who lived in the country long enough to acquire Italian citizenship and so a European passport, and who have subsequently undertaken a further migration to another European country.

This article focuses on associations of Italian-Bangladeshis in London and elsewhere in the UK: the strengths of these organisations, the challenges they face, the activities they promote and the aims that guide them. Specifically, this analysis will aim to 1) identify the typology of associative model these organisations correspond to, as well as the range of activities they undertake; 2) assess the relative weight of both 'Bengali' and 'Italian' identity components in the organisation and internal structuring of these associations; and 3) examine their relationships with intermediate bodies in the UK (trade unions, professional associations, local community groups, etc.), as well as with other Italian diaspora organisations in London.

This introduction will be followed by a theoretical reconstruction of the phenomenon of known migration in Europe and an outline of the process of immigration and rooting of Bangladeshi populations in the UK and Italy, to then focus on Bangladeshi onward migration to the UK. Bangladeshi associations in Italy will next be analyzed, with their lights and shadows, their

6 Basso, 'Gli immigrati in Italia e in Europa'; F. Della Puppa, 'Politiche escludenti e associazionismo immigrato in una "banglatown" del Nordest: Il caso di Alte Ceccato', *Mondi Migranti*, 1 (2017), 57–76; C. Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza: Auto-organizzazione e partecipazione dei migranti in Italia* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007).

7 Basso, 'Gli immigrati in Italia e in Europa'.

8 A. Frisina, *Giovani musulmani d'Italia* (Rome: Carocci, 2007).

9 I. Gjergji, ed., *La nuova emigrazione italiana: Cause, mete e figure sociali* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2015); L. Prencipe, *L'associazionismo italiano all'estero: Una continua storia di 'relazioni'. Il contributo al processo di unificazione*, see <https://www.migrantes.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/50/2019/03/associazionismo-estero.pdf>; M. Sanfilippo and L. M. Vignali, eds., 'La nuova emigrazione italiana', *Studi Emigrazione*, 207 (2017).

strengths and weaknesses. Finally, having explained the methodological choices used, the article will present the main results in a section on Italian-Bangladeshi associations in London. The article's conclusion highlights the article's most significant and original findings, evaluates their theoretical implications and suggests avenues for future research.

2 Onward Migration in Europe

The economic crisis has had a profound impact on the societies of European Union member states,¹⁰ on the relationships between them and on the very meaning of European citizenship, with significant implications for intra-EU migration dynamics.¹¹ The countries of the so-called 'Mediterranean area' appear to be re-assuming the role of 'peripheries', once again serving as significant reservoirs of migrant labour.¹² Alongside this reconfiguration of migratory flows from southern to northern Europe, east–west migration has persisted. This broad transformation of migration scenarios has sparked an intense academic debate and generated a number of interconnected research strands.

Over the past decade, a substantial body of literature has emerged focused on analysing intra-EU labour migration,¹³ developing along several key lines of inquiry: one strand investigates the changes linked to east-to-west migration in the wake of the EU's eastern enlargement;¹⁴ another examines circular

10 A. C. Dinerstein, G. Schwartz and G. Taylor, 'Sociological Imagination as Social Critique: Interrogating the "Global Economic Crisis"', *Sociology*, 48 (2014), 859–868; C. Bonifazi and C. Marini, 'La nuova mobilità europea: Il caso italiano'. *Studi Emigrazione* 51 (195) (2014), 417–436.

11 M. Ambrosini and N. Panichella, 'Immigrazione, occupazione e crisi economica in Italia', *Quaderni di Sociologia* 72 (2016), 115–134; I. Awad, *The Global Economic Crisis and Migrant Workers: Impact and Responses* (Geneva: Ilo, 2009); C. Tilly, 'The Impact of the Economic Crisis on International Migration: A Review', *Work, Employment and Society* 4 (2016), 675–692.

12 J. M. Lafleur and M. Stanek, *South–North Migration of EU Citizens in Times of Crisis* (Switzerland: Springer Open, 2016).

13 N. de Genova and N. Peutz, eds., *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement* (London: Duke University Press, 2010); B. Wagner and A. Hassel, 'Labour Mobility in the EU: Between Economic Freedom and Labour Standards', *Transfer* 22 (2016), 143–148.

14 R. G. Anghel, 'Changing Statuses: Freedom of Movement, Locality and Transnationality of Irregular Romanian Migrants in Milan', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34 (2008), 787–802; G. Engbersen, A. Leekers, I. Grabowska-Lusinska, E. Snel and J. Burgers, 'On the

migration, including the recent phenomenon of ‘posted workers’;¹⁵ a third interrogates the transformation of European citizenship through the lens of neoliberal ‘integrationist’ frameworks;¹⁶ while a fourth focuses on new forms of migration from Mediterranean Europe to the central and northern regions of the EU.¹⁷ Within the latter perspective, a specific line of inquiry has recently emerged that is dedicated to analysing the relatively novel phenomenon of ‘onward migration’—that is, the reactivation of migratory mobility by third-country nationals who, having acquired formal citizenship—or, in some cases, long-term resident status—in a southern European member state, subsequently undertake a further migration to central or northern Europe.¹⁸ In this context, acquired European citizenship emerges, for some, as the final milestone in a process of settlement and integration in the country of

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- Differential Attachments of Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe: A Typology of Labour Migration’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (2013), 959–981.
- 15 E. Çaro, L. Berntsen, N. Lillie and I. Wagner, ‘Posted Migration and Segregation in the European Construction Sector’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (Caro et al. 2015), 1600–1620; J. Cremers, ‘Economic Freedoms and Labour Standards in the European Union’, *Transfer* 22 (2016), 149–162; R. Pijpers, ‘International Employment Agencies and Migrant Flexiwork in an Enlarged European Union’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26 (2010), 1079–1097.
 - 16 A. Favell, ‘The Fourth Freedom: Theories of Migration and Mobilities in “Neo-liberal” Europe’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 17 (2014), 275–289; M. Kahanec and K. F. Zimmermann, *Migration in an Enlarged EU: A Challenging Solution?* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2009); E. Recchi, *Senza frontiere. La libera circolazione delle persone in Europa* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2013).
 - 17 E. Caneva, ‘Giovani italiani che emigrano: Percorsi di vita inediti all’epoca della crisi economica globale’, *Mondi Migranti* 3 (2016), 79–93; I. Gjergji, ed., *La Nuova Emigrazione Italiana: Cause, Mete, Figure Sociali* (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2015); A. Sanguinetti, ‘Nuove migrazioni italiane in Germania. In fuga dalla crisi’, *Mondi Migranti* 3 (2016), 65–78; A. Triandafyllidou and R. Gropas, ‘Voting with Their Feet: Highly Skilled Emigrants from Southern Europe’, *American Behavioral Scientist* 58 (2014), 1614–1633.
 - 18 J. Ahrens, M. Kelly and I. van Liempt, ‘Free Movement? The Onward Migration of EU Citizens Born in Somalia, Iran, and Nigeria’, *Population, Space and Place* 22 (2016), 84–98; S. Danaj and E. Çaro, ‘Becoming an EU Citizen through Italy: The Experience of Albanian Immigrants’, *Mondi Migranti* 3 (2016), 95–108; C. Giralt-Mas, ‘Onward Migration from Spain to the UK: Motivations and Experiences of Latin American Migrants’, *Migration Studies* 5 (3) (2017), 378–396; S. Rezaei and M. Goli, ‘Should I Stay or Should I go? The Emigrating Immigrants’, *International Journal of Business and Globalisation* 6 (2011), 229–250; C. Ramos, ‘Onward Migration from Spain to the UK: Latin American Migrants and the Negotiation of Transnational Mobility’, *Population, Space and Place* 23 (3) (2017), e2009; S. Toma and E. Castagnone, ‘What Drives Onward Mobility within Europe? The Case of Senegalese Migration between France, Italy and Spain’, *Population* 70 (2015), 65–94; I. van Liempt, ‘“And Then One Day They All Moved to Leicester”: The Relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK Explained’, *Population, Space and Place* 17 (2011), 254–266.

naturalisation,¹⁹ while for others, it becomes a gateway to renewed mobility and the opportunity to embark on a new migratory project.²⁰ This is the case for Italian-Bangladeshis who have relocated from Italy to the United Kingdom—specifically, to London—which constitutes the focus of the present contribution. This analysis thus aligns with emerging critiques of conceptualising international migration as a static, binary phenomenon of origin and destination.

The literature offers a variety of perspectives and definitions that aim to describe the multiplicity of mobilities within a single migratory trajectory. The concept of ‘transit migration’ has been employed to examine the movements of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants en route to a different intended destination from the country in which they temporarily reside.²¹ The term ‘secondary migration’ has been used to reflect on the trajectories of migrants from the Global South who have resided legally and for extended—yet ultimately temporary—periods in high-income countries before relocating to a final destination.²² A similar phenomenon is described by the concept of ‘stepwise international migration’, which frames such movements as part of a deliberate strategy adopted by migrants to accumulate the economic, social and relational resources necessary to reach their ultimate migration goal.²³ Ossman introduces the term ‘serial migration’ to refer to the ‘migration careers’ of individuals who have spent significant periods of time attaining substantial levels of social inclusion in at least three different national contexts, pursuing better educational, professional or familial opportunities.²⁴ The notion of ‘twice migration’, on the other hand, was introduced by Bhachu in her study of Sikh populations who, in the early twentieth century, migrated from Punjab to Kenya and Uganda—working primarily on the construction of national railways—and then relocated to the

19 D. Carrillo, ‘Politics and Group Belonging: Predictors of Naturalisation Behaviour in France’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 4 (2015), 1932–1957; F. Della Puppa and D. Sredanovic, ‘Citizen to Stay or Citizen to Go? Naturalization, Security and Mobility of Migrants in Italy’, *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 15 (2016), 366–383.

20 Della Puppa and Sredanovic, ‘Citizen to Stay or Citizen to Go?’.

21 M. Collyer and H. de Haas, ‘Developing Dynamic Categorisations of Transit Migration’, *Population, Space and Place* 18 (2012), 468–481.

22 K. Bang Nielsen, *Next Stop Britain: The Influence of Transnational Networks on the Secondary Movement of Danish Somalis* (Falmer: University of Sussex, 2004); A. Takenaka, *Secondary Migration: Who Re-Migrates and Why These Migrants Matter* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2007).

23 A. M. Paul, ‘Stepwise International Migration: A Multi-Stage Migration Pattern for the Aspiring Migrant’, *American Journal of Sociology* 116 (2011), 1842–1886.

24 S. Ossman, ‘Studies in Serial Migration’, *International Migration* 42 (2004), pp. 111–121.

United Kingdom in the wake of the ‘Africanisation’ policies implemented after the independence of former British colonies.²⁵ This form of mobility was thus a direct outcome of British colonial legacies and occurred within countries belonging to the British Commonwealth.

The term ‘onward migration’,²⁶ in contrast, is situated within scholarly discussions of intra-European mobility involving third-country nationals who have been naturalised. Unlike the actors of the aforementioned types of mobility, individuals engaging in onward migration generally did not plan this second migration from the outset of their migration journey. Instead, the decision typically arises in response to changing socio-economic conditions in the country of residence, shifting horizons of opportunity or expanded aspirations. This study adopts the term ‘onward migration’ as the most analytically appropriate for describing the phenomenon under consideration.

3 Bangladeshis in Europe: A Community on the Move

The story of Bangladeshi migration to the UK has been well told by Gardner and by Zeitlyn,²⁷ with special reference to the main diasporic community in inner East London. The migration started with the East India Company’s recruitment of seamen from the Sylhet province of Bangladesh in the nineteenth century; over time, some of these seamen settled in British port cities, above all the London Docklands. A second wave of migration and settlement occurred in the postwar period, fuelled firstly by the demand for low-skilled labour in factories, catering and services, and then consolidated by family reunion in the wake of the Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962) and the Immigration Act (1971) and by marriage migration.²⁸ By the time of the 2011

25 P. Bhachu, *Twice Migrants: East African Sikh Settlers in Britain* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985).

26 F. Della Puppa and R. King, ‘The New “Twice Migrants”: Motivations, Experiences and Disillusionments of Italian-Bangladeshis Relocating to London’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45 (11) (2019), 1936–1952; Giralt-Mas, ‘Onward Migration from Spain to the UK’; L. Nekby, ‘The Emigration of Immigrants, Return vs. Onward Migration: Evidence From Sweden’, *Journal of Population Economics* 19 (2006), 197–226; Ramos, ‘Onward Migration from Spain to the UK’.

27 Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives*; K. Gardner, *Age, Narrative and Migration: Life History and Life Course Amongst Bengali Elders in London* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); B. Zeitlyn, *Transnational Childhood: British Bangladeshis, Identities and Social Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

28 C. Alexander, ‘Marriage, Migration, Multiculturalism: Gendering “The Bengal Diaspora”’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (3) (2013), 333–351.

census, people of Bangladeshi origin in London numbered 447,200, with nearly a fifth of the national total living in the borough of Tower Hamlets.²⁹ Bangladeshi migration to Italy is much more recent. A key trigger was a large-scale regularisation of 'irregular' migrants made possible by the Martelli Law of 1990, which attracted large numbers of Bangladeshis, including many who were already present in other European countries: a case, in the words of King and Knights, of 'migratory opportunism'.³⁰ The growth of the community has been extremely rapid: from around 4,000 in 1990 to 70,000 in the early 2000s and an estimated 120,000–150,000 ten years later.³¹ Bangladeshi migrants in Italy were initially heavily concentrated in Rome, where they mainly worked as street-hawkers,³² but from the 1990s they quickly spread to other parts of Italy, especially the prosperous north-east; there they found jobs in factories and workshops, creating their own ethnic enclaves or 'bangla-towns'.³³ At first, the Bangladeshi community in Italy was almost exclusively made up of men. However, women and children have become more numerous over time as a result of family-reunification migration.³⁴

The first generation of Bangladeshi citizens who arrived in Italy, between the 1990s and 2000s, settled there and improved their material, social and family conditions over time. However, over the years, on the one hand the economic and social fortunes of the country have transformed; on the other, the legal status, duties and aspirations of Bangladeshi immigrants have changed. In fact, the global economic crisis hit Mediterranean European countries—above all Italy—with particular force, thwarting the possibilities of upward social mobility for working-class families and their children, especially those with a 'migration background'.³⁵ At the same time, Bangladeshi immigrants began to have to look after their children born in Italy, and, after

29 Zeitlyn, *Transnational Childhood*.

30 R. King and M. Knights, 'Bangladeshis in Rome: A Case of Migratory Opportunism', in *Population Migration and the Changing World Order*, eds. W. T. Gould and A. M. Findlay (Chichester: Wiley, 127–143).

31 G. Demaio, 'I bangladesi in Italia', *Affari sociali internazionali* 1–2 (2013), 78–84.

32 M. Knights and R. King, 'The Geography of Bangladeshi Migration to Rome', *International Journal of Population Geography* 4 (4) (1998), 299–321.

33 F. Della Puppa and E. Gelati, *Una banglatown nel nordest* (Trento: professionaldreamers, 2015).

34 F. Della Puppa, *Uomini in movimento. Il lavoro della maschilità tra Bangladesh e Italia* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2014).

35 A. Priori, J. Mapril and F. Della Puppa, 'Banglascapes in Southern Europe: Im-mobilities, Emplacements, Temporalities', *Migration Letters* 18 (1) (2021), 1–11.

more than 15 to 20 years in the country, the parents were often granted Italian citizenship. While for some Italian citizenship is seen as the last step in a process of settling in Italy, for others it is understood as the key to migratory mobility in Europe and beyond. For with an Italian, and therefore European, passport, Italian Bangladeshis can now move in the European space without requiring entry visas and can thus undertake new migration. Since 2010, this has effectively created a process that could be defined as 'onward migration'³⁶—the reactivation of migratory mobility by immigrants originating from non-European countries who, strategically taking advantage of their formal citizenship of a European member state, undertake a further migration towards another member state. This mobility is almost always oriented towards the United Kingdom and, above all, to London. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, known as Istat) reports that in 2016 alone, of the 29,000 Italians with 'non-European' origins who left Italy (a figure up 19 per cent on the previous year), over 2,500 were of Bangladeshi origin.³⁷ The destination of this new migration can be deduced from data showing that 92 per cent of Italians of Asian origin emigrated to the UK. Istat paints a general picture of accelerating Italian emigration to the UK, which was particularly significant in 2016, rising from 17,000 to 25,000 (+42 per cent) in just one year. In 2018 it was estimated that more than 30,000 Italian Bangladeshis lived in the UK.³⁸ The reasons for onward migration are a combination of individual factors, collective histories and more or less idealised representations of Britain.³⁹ Firstly, there is the search for upward social mobility for the migrants' children and an attempt to invest in the future of new generations. Italian Bangladeshis often fear that staying in Italy would risk their children following the same professional and existential trajectory that they themselves experienced: that of general workers in subordinate sectors of the labour market.⁴⁰ London is represented, not without a

36 F. Della Puppa, N. Montagna and E. Kofman, 'Onward Migration and Intra-European Mobilities: A Critical and Theoretical Overview', *International Migration* 59 (6) (2021), 16–28.

37 Istat, *Migrazioni internazionali e interne della popolazione residente* (Rome: Istat 2017).

38 A. M. Chowdhury, 'For the Children: European Bangladeshis' Mass Exodus to UK', *Dhaka Tribune*, 13 June 2018.

39 F. Della Puppa, 'Italian-Bangladeshi in London: A Community within a Community?' *Migration Letters* 18 (1) (2021), 35–47; Della Puppa and King, 'The New "Twice Migrants"'.

40 M. Avola and G. Piccitto, 'Ethnic Penalty and Occupational Mobility in the Italian Labour Market', *Ethnicities*, 20 (6) (2020), 1093–1116; G. Fullin, 'Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrants in a South European Country: Do Race and Religion Matter?', *Work, Employment and Society* 30 (3) (2016), 391–409.

certain level of idealisation, as a global and multicultural city par excellence, providing opportunities in a meritocracy that, unlike Italy, allows young people to improve their skills and potential regardless of their national origin, religious beliefs or somatic characteristics. This representation of London is linked to the supposed governance policy of British multiculturalism that—also by virtue of the UK's colonial past and long tradition of immigration from former colonies—is seen to contribute to the construction of a society in which ethnic-racial belonging, national origin, religious faith and linguistic and cultural elements do not lead to discrimination. Italian Bangladeshis do not see being Italian 'on paper' as sufficient to protect them from the discrimination and inequalities that they experience on a daily basis in Italian society and, above all, in the Italian labour market.

Moreover, London and the UK are attractive because children can be socialised and educated in English, which is essential in an increasingly international labour market and for future geographic mobility beyond national borders. Finally, in addition to the alleged cultural affinity between the UK and its former colonies, the UK is also perceived as a more attractive destination than Italy because of its welfare system, which is considered more inclusive than the familistic Mediterranean model.⁴¹ In conclusion, new Italians of Bangladeshi origin perceive Italian society as still unprepared to include citizens of different ethnic-cultural and national origins, and so they express—and realise—their aspiration to live in a more cosmopolitan social context and, above all, in a more inclusive labour market.

4 Bangladeshis Associations in Italy: Light and Dark

Before taking a closer look at Italian Bangladeshi associations in London, we should briefly analyse associations of Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy. While, on the one hand, Bangladeshi immigrants have a high level of self-organisation, and their associations are extremely active,⁴² on the other hand, political and social relations both in Bangladesh and in the Bangladeshi diaspora have a hierarchical structure based in a binary and 'traditional' distinction between

41 G. Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

42 C. Mantovan, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants' Self-Organization and Associationism in Venice (Italy)', *Migration Letters* 18 (1) (2021), 109–120; P. Quattrocchi, M. Toffoletti and E. V. Tomasin, *Il fenomeno migratorio nel comune di Monfalcone: Il caso della comunità bengalese* (Gradisca d'Isonzo: A.R.E.A.S., 2003).

the *borolok* or 'big people'—in terms of wealth, social status and the prestige of their family of origin—and the *chotolok* or 'small people'.⁴³ This division seems to be particularly strong in rural areas, but it also appears to exert some influence in urban areas. While Bangladeshi society's tendency to rigidity might lead us to imagine a total overlap between the concepts of caste and class, the expansion of the money economy in the countryside, modernisation processes, and the transformative effects of migratory processes have challenged this overlap of wealth and prestige, shifting the dividing line between *boro* and *chato* away from rigid caste divisions. The dialectic operating between these two categories is an expression of the continuous competition and fluidity among different groups.

This hierarchical structure means that examples of 'horizontal' forms of solidarity are few and far between, with 'vertical' ties of clientelism instead providing more effective bonds in the construction of social networks, both in Bangladesh and in the destination country.⁴⁴ Social relations based in political groups or other forms of association are thus characterised by clientelistic relationships centred on influential figures who dispense favours and act as charismatic leaders.⁴⁵ The bonds of trust running through these relations are founded on purely personal bases, characterised by asymmetries in the exchange of goods and services and imbalances in the distribution of power.⁴⁶ The leaders of associations are thus not chosen on the basis of their political or cultural programmes, but on the basis of the charisma they derive from various factors and the possession of different forms of capital—above all, their family of origin and the economic and relational resources at their disposal.⁴⁷ This system of patron–client relations is to some extent reflected in

43 C. S. Bal, *Production Politics and Migrant Labour Regimes: Guest Workers in Asia and the Gulf* (London: Palgrave, 2016); K. Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Migration and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); A. Priori, *Romer Probashira: Reti sociali e itinerari transnazionali bangladesi a Roma* (Rome: Meti, 2012); S. Rozario, *Purity and Communal Boundaries: Woman and Social Change in a Bangladeshi Village* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); J. Thorp, *Power among the Farmers of Daripalla: A Bangladesh Village Study* (Chicago: Caritas, 1978).

44 M. Knights, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants in Italy: From Geopolitics to Micropolitics', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21 (1996), 105–123; Priori, *Romer Probashira*.

45 J. Eade, *The Politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989); S. A. Kochanek, 'The Rise of Interest Politics in Bangladesh', *Asian Survey* 36 (7) (1996), 704–722.

46 Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives*; Mantovan, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants' Self-Organization and Associationism'.

47 P. Bourdieu, *Forme di capitale* (Rome: Armando, 2015).

the ways Bangladeshi immigrants self-organise into associations in their destination countries.⁴⁸ This is of course not a mechanical or deterministic process but is shaped by contextual elements in the country of immigration, as well as by other factors such as the personal characteristics of individuals, their migratory seniority, the networks of relations they establish with locals and with their compatriots and their political relations or identities in their country of origin.⁴⁹ Leaders of associations and other prominent figures within communities are often simply the beneficiaries of clientelistic patronage, with the associations they form manifesting their desire for self-assertion and the accumulation of symbolic and material resources. Obviously, this dynamic creates forms of intra-community and inter-association rivalry. Indeed, a number of studies on Bangladeshi migration and its forms of association have pointed out that there is a tendency to create as many associations as there are potential leaders.⁵⁰ Every association includes several sections or committees responsible for different areas (cultural activities, religious activities, women's sections, youth sections, etc.) chaired by leaders whose role is often more formal than effective.

The model described here has been found in numerous socio-territorial contexts in Italy in which there are large Bangladeshi communities, including Rome,⁵¹ Vicenza,⁵² Venice,⁵³ Monfalcone,⁵⁴ Treviso,⁵⁵ and Padua.⁵⁶ It is also important to point out that associations are sometimes formed according to regional origins, political affiliations or alignment with particular political parties in Bangladesh (whose ideological orientation often strongly contradicts that of the parties from which these associations seek protection or

48 Eade, *The Politics of Community*; J. Eade, I. Fremeaux and D. Garbin, 'The Political Construction of Diasporic Communities in the Global City', in *Imagined Londons*, ed P. Gilbert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Knights, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants in Italy'; Priori, *Romer Probashira*.

49 Mantovan, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants' Self-Organization and Associationism'.

50 Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza*; Priori, *Romer Probashira*; Quattrocchi, Toffoletti and Tomasin, *Il fenomeno migratorio nel comune di Monfalcone*.

51 A. Priori, 'Vita segreta delle "etnie": Politica e stratificazione sociale a Banglatown', *Zapruder*, 22 (2010), 39–54; Priori, *Romer Probashira*.

52 Della Puppa, 'Politiche escludenti e associazionismo immigrato'.

53 Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza*; Mantovan, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants' Self-Organization and Associationism'.

54 Quattrocchi, Toffoletti and Tomasin, *Il fenomeno migratorio nel comune di Monfalcone*.

55 Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza*.

56 M. Morad and F. Della Puppa, 'Bangladeshi Migrant Associations in Italy: Transnational Engagement, Community Formation and Regional Unity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (10) (2018), 1788–1807.

affiliation in Italy)⁵⁷ or without any specific unifying factor beyond the individual characteristics of the leader of the association and the forms of capital possessed by them.⁵⁸ Thus while Bangladeshi associations clearly play a constructive role in Bangladeshi communities in Italy, responding to their different material, symbolic and identity needs—including bureaucratic support, participation in traditional cultural activities, and lessons in the mother-tongue language for the children of immigrants born in Italy—on the other hand, they are marked by fractures and conflicts due to the struggle for ‘community hegemony’.⁵⁹ Associations compete with each other to establish themselves as the ‘official’ representatives of the Bangladeshi community within Italian society and, above all, within its institutions.⁶⁰ The fragmentation of Bangladeshi associations is further fuelled, in a more or less conscious manner, by Italian institutions, including local and regional councils, trade unions, and political parties and movements. Adopting a colonialist and orientalist position, these institutions tend to identify a single representative within the immigrant community with whom to interact, as if they represented the views of all Bangladeshi immigrants and as if every single Bangladeshi immigrant was part of an association.⁶¹ In order to widen their membership base among immigrants, often these political and trade union groups attempt to set themselves up as the political backbone and trusted referent of one of the Bangladeshi associations (often formed ad hoc together with the same local political and/or trade union movements) and, therefore, of the different components of the Bangladeshi community as a whole. This

57 The best example of this is that of a well-known Bangladeshi leader who is active in associations in Rome and, for ‘political’ reasons, is active in the pro-Pakistan religious, conservative and right-leaning party of Jamaat-e-Islami, while in Italy he engages with radical left groups or others linked to the extra-parliamentary left (Priori, ‘Vita segreta delle “etnie”’; Priori, *Romer Probashira*). This contradiction directly derives from the idea that the problems and political categories of Bangladeshis are not translatable into local categories. At the same time, it is partly attributable to the fact that Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy are subject to a drop in status when they migrate from Bangladesh to Europe, from the Global South to the Global North. However, their position as salaried workers on the lowest rungs of the Italian social hierarchy does not correspond to that of the Bangladeshi working class. They thus often support political parties that defend social and material interests that differ from those defended by the social and political organisations that support them and their associations in Italy.

58 Bourdieu, *Forme di capitale*.

59 Della Puppa, ‘Politiche escludenti e associazionismo immigrato’; Morad and Della Puppa, ‘Bangladeshi Migrant Associations in Italy’.

60 Priori, ‘Vita segreta delle “etnie”’.

61 Morad and Della Puppa, ‘Bangladeshi Migrant Associations in Italy’.

leads to the simultaneous legitimisation of various different Bangladeshi associations by various different local interlocutors recognised as 'institutional', and to fragmentation and conflict among the different associations in order to determine which should be considered the 'official' association of 'the Bangladeshis'.⁶²

5 Methods

The empirical material for this article consists of 30 in-depth narrative interviews with Italian-Bangladeshis who had already made their onward migration towards the UK and were involved in associations. All interviews were with male household heads aged from their 30s to 50s. Interviewees were accessed mainly by the 'snowball' method, starting from a variety of initial approaches in order to maximise participant heterogeneity. Some respondents were contacted via key informants and, of course, the networks of various Italian-Bangladeshi associations both in Italy and London.

The interviews were conducted in English and Italian, according to the interviewees' inclination. Given the good knowledge of English of most younger, urban-educated Bangladeshis, and their many years of residence in Italy to learn Italian (often to a very high level of fluency), these two languages functioned effectively for the interviews. Interviews and their recording were administered subject to the usual ethics and practices of informed consent. The interviewee names presented in the reporting of the research are fictitious.

6 Italian-Bangladeshi Associations in London

6.1 *Organisations and Activities*

The hierarchies and the ambivalent, often contradictory, forms of participation operating in the Bangladeshi political arena are reflected in Bangladeshi associations in Italy. These characteristics also appear to be almost blindly reproduced in Italian-Bangladeshi associations in London and the United Kingdom.⁶³ Like in Italy, Bangladeshi Italians in London have a

62 Della Pappa, 'Politiche escludenti e associazionismo immigrato'; Morad and Della Pappa, 'Bangladeshi Migrant Associations in Italy'; Priori, 'Vita segreta delle "etnie"'.
 63 F. Della Pappa, 'Il nuovo associazionismo dei nuovi italiani all'estero. Il caso degli italo-bangladesi nel Regno Unito'. In *Il nuovo associazionismo italiano all'estero. Composizione, consistenza, caratteristiche*, ed. L. Prencipe (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione Roma, 2024).

tendency to self-organise and to create very active associations, with all their contradictions. This led to the almost immediate establishment of a number of key associations, all based in London: the Bangladeshi Italian Association UK; the Bangladeshi Italian Family Welfare Association of Tower Hamlets; the Italian Bangladeshi Welfare Association UK; the Bengali-Italian Welfare Association of Tower Hamlets; and the British Italian Bangladeshi Society.⁶⁴ Often the legal or actual headquarters of the organisations are in public establishments run by Italian Bangladeshis, almost always called 'Caffè Italia', including one in Cannon Street in Whitechapel, one in Watney Street in Shadwell, and one in Ley Street in Ilford. Similarly, the activities promoted by the different organisations also tend to overlap: they principally act as a reference point for the families of newly arrived Italian Bangladeshis in relation to welfare and benefits (income support, housing benefit and child support). Indeed, one of the pull factors of Britain for Bangladeshi Italians is the way its welfare system is represented, although this is often based in a certain degree of idealisation. However, claiming benefits involves a particularly tortuous and difficult bureaucratic and administrative process. Hence, associations work to orientate new members in this process, giving them rapid access to benefits, which often constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for finding housing and surviving on an economic-material level in the British capital. Through word of mouth, the support these associations provide is able to reach almost all newly arrived Italian Bangladeshis, thus at least formally increasing the size of the organisations. In addition, the associations provide support in finding jobs, accessing GPs and other administrative procedures.⁶⁵ Like in Italy, the second most important service these associations provide is the organisation of 'cultural' activities aimed at promoting Bangladeshi traditions, artistic forms (especially dance, theatre, and music), national culinary traditions, religious participation 'by Bengalis' and the national history of Bangladesh.⁶⁶ These activities are mainly targeted at the 'new generations': that is, the children of migrants who most often were born in Italy or moved there at pre-school age. It is of crucial importance to first-generation immigrant parents that their children maintain a link with their parents' and

64 For completeness, we should also mention the European-Bangladeshi Social Organisation in Birmingham.

65 L. S. Talani, M. Rosina, O. Torrisi, R. Deliperi and G. Monteleone, *La migrazione secondaria: Il caso della comunità italo-bengalese* (London: Comites, 2022).

66 Largely ignoring the fact that that history is marked by different and conflicting perspectives, also in political terms.

grandparents' country of origin, despite their socialisation in Italy and now in the UK.

Thus these are primarily cultural associations oriented towards facilitating access to welfare services for newly arrived co-nationals from Italy—following both solidaristic and profit-driven logics. They also organise recreational and social activities for their members, within which some collective religious celebrations may occasionally take place. However, religion does not constitute the main cohesive force within these associations.

6.2 *Ambivalent Identities*

Observing the activities and aims of Italian-Bangladeshi associations in London, it is clear that they operate more in terms of their Bangladeshi identity than as Italian associations abroad. Paradoxically, but understandably, they emphasise and valorise Bangladeshi historical identity even more strongly and actively than the British Bangladeshis whose families have been in London and the UK for centuries.⁶⁷ This is evident, for instance, in the celebrations held on 21 February, a national holiday in Bangladesh commemorating the victims of the suppression of the movement for the defence of the national language of Bangla. These people were killed in 1952 by the Pakistani army, when Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan, known as 'East Pakistan', and the government in the west wanted to impose Urdu as the only language in the country. During the night between 20 and 21 February, jubilant crowds in Dhaka wait in line to lay wreaths, garlands and flowers at the Shaheed Minar, the monument commemorating the martyrs. In London—specifically in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel, named after a Bangladeshi immigrant who was murdered by neo-Nazi youths in 1978—there is the most famous replica (among hundreds globally) of the monument, and on the night of 20–21 February there is a commemoration in London similar to that held in Bangladesh. However, this event is no longer attended by many Londoners of Bangladeshi origin, probably because, having been British for three or four or more generations, they have weakened ties with their 'ancestral homeland' and so do not see the anniversary as important. However, every 21 February for the last few years, a large number of Italian Bangladeshis have gathered on Whitechapel Road, organised by their various associations, often arguing about who should open the procession leading to the monument.

A further sign of disequilibrium between the Bangladeshi and Italian dimension of these UK-based associations is evidenced in the fact that some are

67 Della Puppa, Montagna and Kofman, 'Onward Migration and Intra-European Mobilities'.

organised on a regional basis—although often with links to the broader ‘national’ Italian-Bangladeshi associations. These are not, however, associations of Italian Bangladeshis from Veneto, Lombardy, or Lazio, but are organised according to their members’ origins in specific Bangladeshi districts (Dhaka, Munshiganj, Shariatpur, etc.): for example, the Munshiganj Cultural Association in Barking.

But it is also true that, however marginal it is, Italian-Bangladeshi associations are still interested in a supposed ‘Italianness’, which they express above all in gastronomic and cultural consumption, in aesthetics and clothing, in everyday rhetoric and—importantly!—in returning to Italy for their holidays. As Hilary Clarke writes,⁶⁸ the associations of Italian Bangladeshis in London also organise ‘Italian cultural evenings’—again, aimed at children who straddle two universes of cultural references and who were one of the main reasons for the migration from Italy to the UK.⁶⁹

Apart from these aspects—superficially linked to clothing practices (but exclusively male) and certain patterns of food consumption, such as drinking coffee at the bar—‘Italianness’ does not occupy a central role in the identity constructions of these onward migrants in their everyday lives. In fact, these associations have been created and continue to be maintained by the first generation of Bangladeshis in Italy, who are now onward migrants in London. By contrast, the second generation—namely, the children of these onward migrants—tend to assert their ‘Italianness’ more strongly. When interacting among themselves, including during events organised by Italian-Bangladeshi associations in London (typically organised by their fathers), they frequently use the Italian language. This is consistent with the fact that, for many of them, onward migration was not a personal choice but rather a decision imposed by their parents—one often experienced as involuntary or even contrary to their own wishes.⁷⁰

The associations formed by Italian-Bangladeshis primarily operate in the Bangla language and reflect organisational dynamics typical of Bangladeshi associations in Italy. Moreover, they engage only minimally with other Italian diaspora organisations in London—such as the Comites of London—with the notable exception of the British Italian Bangladeshi Society.

68 H. Clarke, ‘Italian Bengalis: Meet London’s Newest Ethnic Minority’, *Independent*, 29 November (2015).

69 Della Puppa and King, ‘The New “Twice Migrants”’.

70 F. Della Puppa, ‘Chasing the Dream: Masculinity and Male Honour of Italian-Bangladeshi Men Relocating to London’, *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 18 (4) (2023), 360–376.

In fact, the British Italian Bangladeshi Society merits a closer look. Chaired and driven by an Italian Bangladeshi who has acquired British citizenship and is a member of the Comites di Londra, it does not organise cultural 'programmes' like the other associations;⁷¹ it is more focused on facilitating bureaucratic procedures for members of the Italian-Bangladeshi community in the UK, working as a bridge between the Italian administration, its consular representatives and those communities.

Finally, it is worth looking more closely at the 'governance' of multiculturalism in the United Kingdom. The British multicultural model, which demands representatives for the 'ethnic communities' present in the UK, has contributed to the creation of associations—based on religious, national, regional or 'ethnic' commonalities—and has financed their activities on condition that they reflect the—always orientalist—expectations and representations of British society. These expectations and representations are modelled around a supposed 'cultural authenticity' constructed by British society; this emphasises the more stereotyped ideological-cultural aspects of that community, which are often considered to be more 'traditional'. The organisations that have been most successful in capitalising on this model have been those most aligned with such expectations: that is, the more conservative and often religious organisations, which receive substantial public and private funding from the British government.

How, then, will Italian-Bangladeshi associations position themselves within this scenario, what expectations will British society develop with respect to Italian Bangladeshis and, consequently, who will support them, including at a material level? Will they emphasise the stereotypes of a supposed 'Italianness' or will they attempt to confirm an imagined 'Bangladeshi' essentialism?

7 Conclusion

This article helps to deepen our knowledge of the associations created by Italians abroad, specifically in London and the United Kingdom, and also contributes to the analysis of the dynamics of intra-European migration and strategic uses of citizenship. It focuses on the associations created by Italian

⁷¹ These are events organised when there are Bangladeshi national or religious celebrations. In fact the word 'festival' does not reflect the nature of these events, which are better described with the word 'programmes' as used by Bangladeshis. See Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza*.

citizens of Bangladeshi origin who have undertaken a new migration following their acquisition of Italian citizenship.

For over three decades, immigration from Bangladesh to Italy has created a substantial Bangladeshi community on Italian soil, whose active associations have helped to enrich the country's social, cultural, political and public life. Indeed, Rome hosts the largest Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe after London, and the community's artistic, cinematographic, gastronomic and architectural activity have been evident since the organisation of the abandoned and occupied former pasta factory known as 'la Pantanella'—first by the United Asian Workers Association and then by the Bangladesh Association in Italy.⁷² In Venice, the intercultural and interreligious activities promoted by Bangladeshi associations are supported by the Metropolitan City Council and the local church,⁷³ and in Vicenza,⁷⁴ Padua⁷⁵ and Monfalcone⁷⁶ there is much shared political and other activity between local organisations and Bangladeshi groups.

This community and its associations now contribute to bringing 'Italian-ness' to the world, through their emigration from Italy enabled by the acquisition of citizenship—which we could call onward migration⁷⁷—which is directed above all to the UK.⁷⁸

However, the high level of active participation by Italian Bangladeshis in associations and political and cultural activities also has its darker sides and contradictions. The personal dynamics seen in Italian-Bangladeshi organisations in Italy seem to have been reproduced in the UK, with British based associations also strongly characterised by clientelistic relations and forms of patronage, and with constant conflict between the various different associations.

The activities of Italian-Bangladeshi organisations in the UK are mainly focused on two areas: support and advocacy for new arrivals wanting to claim income and housing benefits; and cultural promotion. However, this second sphere of activity is tipped towards 'Bangladeshi' identity rather than 'Italian'

72 Priori, 'Vita segreta delle "etnie"'; Priori, *Romer Probashira*.

73 Mantovan, *Immigrazione e cittadinanza*; Mantovan, 'Bangladeshi Immigrants' Self-Organization and Associationism'.

74 Della Puppa, 'Politiche escludenti e associazionismo immigrato'.

75 Morad and Della Puppa, 'Bangladeshi Migrant Associations in Italy'.

76 Quattrocchi, Toffoletti and Tomasin, *Il fenomeno migratorio nel comune di Monfalcone*.

77 Della Puppa, Montagna and Kofman, 'Onward Migration and Intra-European Mobilities'.

78 Della Puppa and King, 'The New "Twice Migrants"'.

identity; the latter is largely of interest to the second generation: adolescents and young adults who were either born or arrived as infants in Italy and so, having been socialised there, have a stronger link to the Italian language and customs than their parents.⁷⁹

Finally, just as in Italy, relations with intermediate bodies in the UK (trade unions, trade associations, local associations etc.) have—more or less consciously—reinforced the ambivalences and distortions of Bangladeshi associations. Interacting with British society and institutions and, above all, with the processes, norms and instruments at the basis of the UK's multiculturalist approach can push foreign associations to harden stereotypes and simplify their self-representation for instrumental reasons.

In conclusion, this article offers a contingent framing of associations created by Italians of Bangladeshi origin in London and the UK. It is still unclear how this community will develop and how its associations will evolve, what weight Italian citizenship will assume in the post-Brexit scenario, what role the almost inevitable acquisition of British citizenship will play within associations and, above all, what the behaviour and attitudes of the younger generations will be towards these associations. These questions remain open and could provide future lines of research.

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79 Della Puppa, 'Il nuovo associazionismo dei nuovi italiani all'estero'.

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