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# Multiple Migrations and intra-European Mobilities of Italian Naturalized Migrants

Francesco DELLA PUPPA<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper looks at the recent phenomenon of Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy who are onward-migrating to London, after their acquisition of the Italian citizenship – that allows them to move and relocate within the territory of the EU. Adopting an intersectional approach, I seek to answer two questions: what were the mobility trajectories of these migrants before arriving in Italy and within Italy? Why do they onward-migrate from Italy to the UK? For most Italian-Bangladeshis, Italy constitutes just a step in their migration trajectories: their mobility biographies are marked by many arrivals and departures. This responds to their desire for upward social mobility and their realization as adult men. This also leads them to leave Italy and move to London: in order to escape socially limiting factory work, to invest in the educational future of their children, to join a much larger Bangladeshi community set within a receptive multicultural and religion-tolerant society.

*Keywords:* onward migration, Italian-Bangladeshi, migration trajectories, European citizenship, multiple mobilities.

## Introduction

The economic crisis has had a profound impact on both the European Union and countries beyond its borders (Bostan and Grosu, 2010), with significant implications for migration (Viruela, 2015). It has contributed to a shift in migration patterns: European Mediterranean countries have re-emerged as sources of labour migration. It is also contributing to the relatively new phenomenon of ‘onward migration’ within Europe: the reactivation of migratory mobility through Third Country Nationals (TCN). That is, migrants originating from non-EU countries who, once they have acquired EU citizenship in one EU country, leave for another.

This has led to the flourishing of rich literature that criticises the conceptualisation of migration as a simple bipolar event – a move from A to B. ‘Onward migration’

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(Ahrens et al., 2016) is just one of the many terms for this phenomena. Indeed, there are several other terms and perspectives scattered across the literature, including transit migration (Collyer and de Haas, 2010), transmigration (Mueller, 2004), stepwise migration (Paul 2011), serial migration (Ossman, 2004), ‘twice-migration’ (Bhachu 1985) and multiple migration (Ciobanu, 2015).

Despite – or perhaps because of – this terminological complexity, few empirical studies have been conducted to explain the migrant’s representations of reasons for these multiple mobilities. Undoubtedly, the ongoing search for better opportunities may be the key to answering this question in many cases. In particular, it led Andall (1999) to adopt the term ‘immigration shopping’ to describe these multiple moves in search of better work, childcare and family-networking opportunities.

Here, I will focus on multiple mobilities of migrants originating from Bangladesh and arriving in the UK via an intermediate migration stage(s) in Italy where they acquired their European passport.

This contribution study poses two sets of research questions: (1) First, what were the mobility trajectories of these migrants before arriving in and within Italy? How can these trajectories be interpreted in the light of an intersectional approach that considers gender identity, class position in the country of origin and their upward social mobility strategies? (2) Second, why do they onward-migrate from Italy to the UK? How do they articulate the mix of factors in operation to frame their decision to move to another country?

## Methodology

The empirical material for this paper consists of 40 in-depth narrative interviews with Italian-Bangladeshis: 20 were interviewed in London having already made their relocation, and 20 were interviewed in North-East Italy. This latter group were Italian citizens planning to move to the UK.

All interviews were with male household heads aged from their 30s to 50s who had lived in Italy at least 15 years, long enough to acquire Italian citizenship and an EU passport (Della Puppa & Sredanovic 2016). Respondents were accessed mainly by ‘snowballing’, starting from a variety of initial approaches in order to maximise participant heterogeneity. Some respondents were contacted via key informants and the networks of various Italo-Bangladeshi associations both in Italy and London.

The fieldwork was in two phases: in Italy during 2010-11, and in London in 2015-16. 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 high level of fluency), these two languages functioned effectively for the interviews.

## Geographic, Social and Gendered Mobilities

It was not until the 90s that many migrants reached the northern shores of the Mediterranean, along with the deep economic and social transformations and the turbulent political and economic scenario taking shape in Bangladesh. The continuous changes in the political landscape brought about a climate of violence, insecurity and corruption, blocking the aspirations of middle class families who, although possessing the means of subsistence and cultural capital, were not able to improve their social status.

The Bangladeshi community today numbers between 120,000 and 150,000 individuals. In the 90s, Italy still offers relatively good working and wage conditions by virtue of a growing labour market, the structural importance of the shadow economy and the need of highly flexible and low cost labour force that the country tried to satisfy through ‘instrumentally lax’ immigration policies (Della Puppa, 2014). Nevertheless, the high economic cost of migration in Europe and Italy compared with other destinations (the petro-monarchies of the Middle East *in primis*) has worked as a social filter, selecting the middle and upper-middle class migrants whose families had sufficient economic capital to support such investment. In addition to the social position of the first generation of Bangladeshis in Italy, their gender identity should also be underlined: this migration, in fact, was opened in almost all cases by a male first-migrant (Della Puppa, 2014).

This generation of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy is mainly composed of young bachelors and members of the middle-class of Bangladeshi society: sons of wealthy families with a good cultural capital who agreed to undergo a downgrading process in Europe in order to improve their (family) social position. In fact, this migration is configured as a strategy of the middle classes to regain the path of upward mobility – for themselves, for their family of origin and for their future ‘elective’ family – blocked by recent historical, economical and political that have affected the country:

*I was from a neither rich and neither poor family. An average family. “Average” means that my father had a work and we have always had a life without problems. We ate, we slept and every month we haven’t saved anything, we were always at the same level. For this, when I grew up, I was thinking, “What if I take over the work that was doing my dad who lost his life, I will lose my life. If I want to improve, I must leave the country” (Male, 44 years old, Italy).*

At the same time, the reactivation of upward social mobility and the socio-economic improvement of the domestic aggregate through migration constitute responsibilities of which their fulfilment can be seen as a necessary step to the self-realization as adult man and the social construction of the male identity. Therefore, the migration experience represents a necessary journey in order to be viewed through different eyes (Monsutti 2007; Osella and Osella 2000). *Bidesh*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In Bangla, ‘foreign land’, ‘abroad’

constitutes the place where it is possible to become adults, to pass the test of manhood through which it is possible to prove one's capability to carry the burden of family responsibilities and individual ambitions:

*I left my country because I wanted to be someone; I wanted to establish my life totally with my trying. What is the aim of every man? [...] I had the desire to be in a good position, to be a success man from my own and not from my mother and father (Male, 30 years old, Italy).*

For the representatives of the first generation of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy, therefore, the migratory experience constitutes a strategy for individual and collective as well as family and personal realization that intersects gender and class categories, outlining a social construction process of gendered class and gender of class.

### Multiple Trajectories

The interviewees report almost overlapping journeys. Administrative irregularity in Italy and inclusion in the 'shadow economy' represent common experiences. After having spent a more or less prolonged period as irregular migrants, usually in Rome, they have regularized their administrative position through amnesty.

However, their arrival in Italy could be interpreted just as a 'milestone' of a multiple mobilities experience. For example, some have opened their migration trajectory with an initial shift to the territories of what was the Soviet Union that has always favoured the entry of *probashi*<sup>3</sup>. In fact, after the implosion of the regimes of the so-called 'real socialism', many have turned to Mediterranean Europe. Others have left their country of origin to move initially to the Middle East. In this case, this often short-term first experience constituted a sort of initiation into the migration and, above all, necessary work for the accumulation of the necessary resources to undertake a second migration to Europe.

From the narratives of interviewees, stories emerge of diversified mobilities based on their unequal economic and social capital. For instance, one respondent said he arrived later in Europe after a first experience in the Middle East, another managed to land directly in Rome with a tourist visa and another, who arrived in Italy for the administrative regularization, experienced a real migration episode.

The Italian residence permit, in addition to representing an element of class distinction, provides migrants with the opportunity to return 'home' and explore the marriage market in their country of origin, where they have acquired social credentials as successful migrant men. In fact, their condition allows them to arrange marriages that are particularly advantageous, often with women from a higher social status. In addition, the marriage could constitute an individual and

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<sup>3</sup> In Bangla 'those who went abroad', 'emigrants'.

collective strategy of reactivation of upward social mobility and, at the same time, a further experience of social construction of adult masculinity.

In Italy, this regularization has allowed many migrants to shift from Rome to the industrial suburbs of northern Italy and to consequent work (in a factory) and residential stabilization, which are the necessary conditions for reunification with spouses and the birth of a second generation. Becoming a father triggers new reflexivity processes for migrants and loads them with new responsibilities, including providing to their children more opportunities for socio-economic achievement than those of previous generations, meeting an intra-family and intra-generational mandate. At the same time, as previously mentioned, despite their social position in Bangladesh, the work they do in Italy ‘they would never dream of doing in their home country’ (Zeitlyn, 2006: 32). Geographic mobility from the ‘global south’ to Europe corresponds with downward social mobility from the middle-class to the working class (Della Puppa, 2014).

Arriving in Italy between the 1990s and 2000s, today, these representatives of the first generation of *probashi* have fulfilled the necessary requirements for acquiring citizenship – 10 years of regular and continuous residence in the country. If granted, it is transferred to the children.

For this generation of ‘Italian *probashi*’, the acquisition of citizenship has occurred concurrently with other events that pushed migrants to re-shape their biographical and mobility trajectories. On the one hand, the global economic crisis has changed the horizons of opportunity, reducing the chances of socio-economic realization and satisfactory individual and collective achievement. This situation is especially true for the southern European countries, characterized by a severe economic and social immobility and especially for the young people of the underprivileged classes (Gjergji, 2015). On the other hand, the birth and socialization of their children in Italy has caused migrant fathers to reflect on the discriminatory mechanisms of Italian society and, especially, its labour market they have experienced on their own as migrants – even if formally as Italians.

Therefore, the Italian passport may symbolize for some migrants the ultimate step of a stabilization process in Italy, whereas for others it may become a strategic factor for reactivating migratory mobility (Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2016). By becoming Italian citizens, the *probashi* acquire the ability to move within the territory of Europe and to undertake any new migration (Danaj & Caro, 2016) – almost always oriented towards the UK.

### ‘To Go Upward’

According the Bangladeshi Embassy in Italy, there are approximately 6,000 Italian households of Bangladeshi origin (approximately 25,000 persons) who left the Italian peninsula and moved to London. This figure is very low compared with

the number of Italians residing in London – who equal approximately 200,000 (Scotto, 2015) –, but at the same time, these statistics are quite substantial compared to the number of Bangladeshis in Italy.

As mentioned, one of the representations constructed to explain and justify the onward migration traces it back to the crisis that is affecting the Mediterranean countries with particular intensity. For them, however, rather than the economic consequences of the crisis, what determined their choice was the awareness of upward social mobility for themselves and especially their children, confirming the ‘male’ realization of the migrant (Della Puppa, 2014).

Previous research has shown that the crisis has affected immigrants and their families more harshly, (Bonifazi and Marini, 2014). However, the interviewees reported that in Italy they worked with permanent contracts in engineering, tanning or catering companies, insisting they were not particularly concerned about the maintenance of their job:

*I worked for a company called DLP, an engineering company that did industrial tie-rods. I had a permanent contract, calm, all settled. The crisis hasn't created serious problems to me, to my job (Male, 45 years old, London).*

*I worked very well in Italy, with a permanent contract, My company produced cookies and it is still growing and acquired two more brands. Furthermore, when I left I did not feel any economic crisis (Male, 47 years old, London).*

Despite this, the reactivation of the migratory mobility is described as an ‘escape’ from economic and social immobility that characterizes the Italian scenario and denies any possibility of realization for younger generations. It is then represented, above all, as an investment aimed at the reactivation of the upward social mobility for the children born in Italy:

*I chose to come to England because I thought first of all to the future. The future of my children. I could not see any future for them in Italy. So I came to England for them, to give them better chances (Male, 46 years old, London).*

*I chose London, I chose this struggling to go upward, “go upward” I mean them [the children], I'm not talking about me. I brought my children to London to give them a better life (Male, 47 years old, London).*

When they reached the Mediterranean north shore between the 90s and 2000s, Italian society presented a still vaguely expanding economy, a relatively inclusive labour market and some flexible migratory policies. Thus, it constituted a stimulating environment in which to aspire to social improvement. Through this, they were able to pursue the realization of themselves as man and father, to demonstrate their successful masculinity in front of their family, countrymen, society and themselves.

Today, Italian society is static and asphyxiated, and the possibilities of realization and social mobility are severely limited. For Italian-Bangladeshis, the only way to fully realize their goals and their lives as men and not frustrate the efforts and sufferings of the migration experience is to mortgage their social and material achievements and invest in the upward social mobility of their descendants through an onward geographic mobility.

### **English as the Key to the World**

The increased attractiveness of London in terms of investment on the future of children takes shape in different areas. First, the dissatisfaction of Bangladeshi parents with the Italian school and university system must be highlighted. The Italian university is not a problem in itself. Rather, it is the impossibility of educating and socializing children in the English language. English is not a language of common knowledge in Italy, which is a significant concern for Bangladeshi parents who are clearly more oriented towards a cosmopolitan dimension than the Italian population.

The language of the former colonizers continues to attract Bangladeshis. For this reason, and because of the symbolic value conveyed by the former capital of the empire, a university degree obtained in the UK has greater value for many Bangladeshis than an Italian degree. In line with the ‘global’ aspirations of *probashi*, this is also true in other Western countries outside of Italy:

*Another reason, that is very important for me and for the Bangladeshi community, is English, for my daughter’s future. If she will study and grow up in English, she will be able to work here, in Bangladesh or all over the world, but if she stay in Italy, she learns only Italian (Male, 50 years old, London).*

*Interviewees clearly understood that the expansion of opportunities for social and economic realization that they hoped for future generations – and that will realize themselves as successful men – could only take place in an international labour market and through a geographical mobility that transcends national borders. The English language and a more prestigious level of education compared with the Italian degree would provide their descendants with the necessary tools to establish themselves and acquire that social mobility that they have tried to re-activate through a first migration.*

### **A Way out from the Factories**

Italian-Bangladeshis perceive that if the annihilation of upward social mobility possibilities is a concrete thing for the young Italians of native origin (Gjergji, 2015), it is even worst for those of migrant origin. Actually, they reveal that as



migrants in Italy they feel discriminated against, especially in the labour market because they are channelled towards more strenuous, unhealthy and lower paying tasks and deprived of concrete possibilities of vertical mobility. Therefore, being Italian 'on paper' would not constitute a sufficient condition to escape the informal and structural discrimination that many migrants face (Andall, 2002). Formally granted citizenship is actually considered by the interviewees as a 'third-class' citizenship, a citizenship embedded in all areas of social action, in the body, in the colour of the skin, in the surname and in all those elements that "betray" the Bangladeshi origin:

*If you live in Italy, but you come from the Third World like me, you'll always be a third-class citizen [...] My skin does not change. [...] I'm Italian on the documents, but my daughters will always be daughters of a Bangladeshi worker (Male, 48 years old, Italy).*

The prospect of a life in Italy would imply the impossibility of any actual improvement in migrants' socio-occupational condition and, especially, the risk that their children will follow the same trajectory: workers in a factory or employed in the subordinate segments of the labour market. If migrants have accepted the degradation of being considered 'third-class citizens', this condition no longer seems acceptable with the birth of new generations, as it would constitute a failure as fathers and men:

*I've been a worker, but my kids must not do factory work. In London, many Bangladeshi work officer, no manual labour, no just worker; here Bangladeshi cannot do office, bank. I want my daughter becomes a doctor, engineer. In London, you can, not yet in Italy (Male, 49 years old, Italy).*

Interviewees are aware of the perception of the Italian labour market concerning migrants and young people of migrant origin. They also realize that the 'serious economic and social immobility' and the disappearance of 'possibilities for a satisfactory individual achievement' (Gjergji, 2015: 18) that follow affect – albeit with unequal intensity – all members of younger generation, regardless of nationality. Unlike native families, however, Italian-Bangladeshi migrants are used to move and migrate and their 'mobility capital' can be a useful resource in the structural impasse of the country:

*In the end, I am a foreigner anyway, no? Italy, England or Germany, for me almost equal. I go where is better. I understood that I can change. Out of Bangladesh, I am always a foreigner. Sure, I lived in Italy for over 25 years and it was my second country, but it is not my homeland (Male, 44 years old, London).*

## To 'Feel at Home' far From Home

London, the onward migration main destination of Italian-Bangladeshis, is represented – not without a certain amount of idealization – as the global and multicultural city par excellence, as a meritocratic environment full of opportunities that allow young people of every country to enhance their capacities. This representation is linked, by the interviewees, to the British multiculturalism governance: a tradition that has contributed to building a society where 'ethnic-racial' identities, national origin, religion and culture features do not constitute a discriminative stigma:

*There are 600.000 Bangladeshi living here. A big big community. There are three Bangladeshi members in the British parliament. I mean from Bangladeshi origin. In local council, there are Bangladeshis, Africans, British... all together. While in Italy, you will remain always "extracomunitario" [migrant from TNC]. You have got Italian passport, OK, Italian people is good and nice, but it is very difficult to have an institutional role, to have a high status job. There are no policemen of migrant origin. It is a kind of racism. Here, the policemen are black, Chinese, Bengalis... In Italy, none from our country has a good job, only operaio [factory worker], while, here, if you have studied as doctor you'll be a doctor. Bengali, Chinese, British, it doesn't matter. [...] Here there is the multiculturalism. It is normal (Male, 46 years old, London).*

This representation is also attributed to the legacy of British colonialism and therefore, to the long migratory tradition that has linked the Indian subcontinent to the colonial motherland since the seventeenth century and has allowed the creation of the oldest and largest Bangladeshi community outside of Bangladesh. For these reasons, London is perceived as an environment where you can 'feel at home' and live in accordance with what interviewees define 'Bengali culture and lifestyle':

*Here there is no difference from Bangladesh. We are many. It is a "small Bangladesh": you find everything. If you don't want to speak in English, it doesn't matter: 90% talks Bangla. Here there are music, arts programs, so many things. Here is almost Bangladesh. I feel at home (Male, 48 years old, London).*

The long tradition of immigration from former colonies makes London a context in which it is not necessary to justify their presence.

## For a Religious Education of Children in Europe

The possibility to express self-ascribed memberships is a very important role played by religion. For many interviewees, the possibilities of living and revealing more freely their religious affiliation in the public realm and especially to ensure a religious education of their children constitutes a main driving force for emigration to the UK:

*[In London] my fellow countrymen go to study the Koran; there are madrassas. All of this is in London, but here it is not. [It is] important for children now to think about this. [...] London is better. Because we are Muslims and religion is important for my countrymen. For the children the religion is important. So I am thinking of [going to] London, because in London there is everything (Male, 50 years old, Italy).*

In Italy, and even more in the wake of the emotions aroused by the recent events in Paris, Brussels and Berlin, politicians and administrators read the dynamic social environment, especially at the local level, as a ‘clash of civilizations’, or at least they see Islam as incompatible with Italian society (Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005). This can lead to the creation of a latent conflict, which will surely influence individual choices of Italian-Bangladeshi immigrants and their families (Ambrosini, 2013).

*I do not go [to the mosque] all the time: sometimes I am practising, I am praying, but there is another problem. [...] The Municipality is making too many problems for us to go to the local mosque. Because they say we are making a disturbance... [...] So I am trying not to go there all the time: sometimes I pray here in my house (Male, 44 years old, Italy).*

During the process of migration, religious practice, sense of belonging and Islamic prayer are relevant factors for the social construction of the masculine parental identity. For *probashi* fathers, Islamic practice represents an educational duty towards children born in Italy. Consequently, the impossibility of fully assuming this duty has pushed Italian-Bangladeshis overseas.

## **Welfare and Security Capital**

Finally, the UK is also a more attractive destination compared with Italy by virtue of its welfare system, which is considered more inclusive than the ‘Mediterranean’ system (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The inclusion in the British welfare system is described by Italian-Bangladeshi interviewees as another decisive factor behind the new migration because it relieves them from the strict responsibility of being the family male breadwinner. In Italy, this responsibility is completely focused on the working dimension, increasing their ‘security capital’ (Zeitlyn, 2016) and being a safety net on which to rely in case of problems:

*Here there is economical support from the benefit. If I lose my job and I don't work for three, four months, I can live. While in Italy is difficult: to pay the rent, the food, everything... I get these informations from Bangladeshi friends living there and I decided to come in England me too. It's a form of security for the future (Male, 46 years old, London).*

This could be an unrealistic representation of the British welfare state and its inclusive nature. Thus, an idealized representation that is reproduced through migratory networks has concretely guided mobility trajectories of Italian-Bangladeshi households.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to a renewal of the conceptualisation of migration as a simple bipolar event. Further holding together and enriching this conceptualisation in a unifying analytical framework of migration and mobility approaches, starting from an emblematic case study.

The general narrative distilled from the in-depth interviews provided the empirical evidence to answer the two main research questions set out.

During the last three decades, Italy has become an important centre of the Bangladeshi migration. In fact, a part of this will find, in Rome and – as a result of both international and internal mobility (King and Skeldon, 2010) – next to many industrial areas of the north of the country, a stable life situation, characterized by a relatively inclusive labour and housing market and ‘instrumentally lax’ migration policies. This responds to the desire for upward social mobility sought by first-migrant men and, consequently, of their realization as adult men.

However, if observed within the migratory trajectories of the respondents, Italy constitutes just a step. In fact, before arriving and during their stay in the peninsula, their mobility biographies are marked by many arrivals and departures. Indeed, the Peninsula may represent a temporary landing and a broader horizon of possibilities thanks to a ‘constellation of geopolitical factors’ (Knights, 1996). This is particularly evident for a specific component of Bangladeshi migrants: young bachelor middle-class men with good cultural capital, escaping from the social immobility to which they felt to be doomed in their country of origin.

Nevertheless, in the context of migration in Italy, the rapid increase of *probashi* will soon enter a new phase, targeting the UK that has never lost its colonial attractiveness. At the same time, this may frame Italy’s vocation as a country of ‘transit’ and ‘migration crossroads’. Along with the Italian and European scenario, the trajectories of migrants – in the meantime European citizens – are changing in a society that no longer meets their renewed individual and family needs.

Interviews revealed a variety of interlinked and overlapping pushes to onward migration. Common to virtually all interview scripts were the aspiration to build a better future, especially for the next generation, and the desire to become part of a much larger Bangladeshi community set within a receptive multicultural and religion-tolerant society.

Here, then, this ‘new migration’ is part of the continuum of a single migration biography. If the meaning of the multiple migratory mobilities that have linked

Bangladesh to Italy can be traced in the search for upward social mobility and the realization of migrants' own masculinity as family men, the relocation in the UK appears as the only way to ensure that their past mobility continues to make sense.

Finally, the role of citizenship must be underlined. On obtaining an Italian passport after ten or more years of continuous residence, Italian-Bangladeshis have a kind of 'citizenship to go' (Della Puppa and Sredanovic, 2016), which allows them to leave the country and explore new horizons. Nevertheless, the contemporary British scenario could prefigure new mobilities and strategies within their migratory biographies or, at least, a next stage of their lives. Specifically, how their Italian passports and their Bangladeshi heritage will fare in post-Brexit Britain is yet to be determined.

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