

## Article

# Transnational Cross-Border Family Ties: Diasporic Lives of Bangladeshis in Italy and Beyond

Mohammad Morad 

Department of Sociology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet 3114, Bangladesh; morad-soc@sust.edu

**Abstract:** The scope of this paper is to gain a better understanding of how Bangladeshi migrants in Italy maintain transnational family attachments, across multiple destinations, with the home country as well as with several host countries. The data comes from fieldwork in Northeast Italy. Research methods include in-depth interviews and participant observation. The findings reveal that a high proportion of Bangladeshi migrants maintain a variety of transnational and diasporic ties with their family and friends living in the country of origin and different European countries. These include family obligations, remittances, establishing businesses back home, visits and communication. They also preserve their national identity in this host society by maintaining cultural ways of belonging and through religious practices and involvement in Bangladeshi politics. The findings have also shown that Italian Bangladeshi families work to foster transnational family ties among the new generations born in Italy, who have little knowledge of their ancestral country. On a final note, this paper argues that transnational connections with the homeland play an important role in shaping the diasporic lives of Bangladeshis in Italy.

**Keywords:** diaspora; transnationalism; home identity; Bangladeshi migrants; Northeast Italy



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## 1. Introduction

Academic discussion concerning diasporas in the era of globalization has been gaining momentum. It was not until the 1980s that the issue of the diaspora became a recognized field of academic research (Brubaker 2005), since when its meaning and uses have grown in a number of ways (Morad et al. 2014; Brubaker 2005; Sheffer 2003; Safran 1991). While the classical notion of diaspora involves an involuntary migration, the newer notion refers to any kind of dispersal—voluntary and involuntary migration. Faist (2008) argued that diasporas that have a strong attachment to their society of origin can be considered transnational. In this sense, numerous contemporary studies conceptualize different immigrant groups as diasporas. Safran (1991), for instance, argues that Cubans and Mexicans in the USA, the overseas Chinese, Poles, Palestinians and blacks in North America and the Caribbean, Turks in Germany, Indians and Armenians in different countries, Pakistanis in Britain, Maghrebis in France, and some others, are various diaspora groups around the world. Drawing on the same logic, Sheffer (2003) identifies a number of labour migrants as diasporas, such as Bangladeshi, Pilipino, Indian, Greek, Haitian, Italian, Korean, Mexican, Turkish, Polish, Salvadorian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and many other labour migrants who are working outside their country of origin. In their argument, transnational homeland attachment has been considered a key characteristic in the formation of a diaspora (Morad et al. 2014; Sheffer 2003; Cohen 1997; Safran 1991). For obvious reasons, many immigrants' source countries have used the term 'diaspora' instead of 'emigrant' in recent times as this encourages financial investment and endorses loyalty among expatriates (Faist 2010).

The perspective of migrant transnationalism has emerged as a broader multi-disciplinary field in migration studies in the 1990s by focusing on Latin American and Caribbean migration to the United States (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Whereas the theory of assimilation describes immigrants as people who uproot themselves and sever links with their

homeland, the central premise of transnationalism is migrants' cross-border practices (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). This new approach underlines the fact that the process of migrant integration and the creation of homeland ties take place simultaneously (Lauer and Wong 2010; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Portes et al. 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). This transnational attachment to homeland has been defined as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al. 1994, p. 6). These transnational relations operate at different levels, such as the social, economic, cultural, political and religious lives of migrants, and transcend national borders and connect the migrant's country of origin and country of migration (Levitt and Waters 2002; Portes et al. 1999).

Social connections refer to the ties that migrants' family maintain by remaining in regular contact with and visits to family members, friends and relatives and others whom they have left behind (Guarnizo 2003; Vertovec 2003; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Social transnationalism also involves social remittances, such as concepts, values, norms, identities and social practices that flow from the country of residence to the country of origin (Levitt 1998). These social remittances grow especially when migrants visit their country of origin or non-migrant family members and friends visit migrants in a receiving society, or through the exchange of letters and parcels, telephone calls, videos and cassettes (Levitt 1998).

Economic ties denote the migrant's role as the main support for families and relatives living in their society of origin by sending remittances, buying land and establishing businesses back home (Morad and Gombač 2015; Guarnizo 2003; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). As regards the European context, Ambrosini (2014, p. 4) divided economic transnationalism into three broad types; the first he refers to is 'circulatory transnationalism' which operates through couriers who physically connect various host cities with many other destinations. The second he described as 'connective transnationalism' which functions via activities that link the society of origin and destination through economic remittances and regular communication using money transfer shops, phone centres, internet cafes and other modern technological services. The third he called 'commercial transnationalism' and relates to business activities, in which ethnic products, such as food, furniture, clothing and gifts are circulated. The last one is 'leisure activities' that denotes the symbolic connotation of transnationalism, for instance, Turkish baths, yoga centres, etc.

Cultural transnational ties highlight migrants' diasporic ways of belonging to their home countries. To demonstrate their cultural bonds, migrants create various ethnic associations in order to preserve their ethnic culture in the setting of the host society (Morad and Della Puppa 2019; Morad and Gombač 2015; Vertovec 2003; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Migrants are also involved in promoting their ethnic culture through maintaining a connection with their native radio stations, television channels and newspapers (Morad and Gombač 2015; Guarnizo and Diaz 1999) and preparing, eating and sharing ethnic food (Morad and Gombač 2015; Vallianatos and Raine 2008). Moreover, several authors highlight migrants' diasporic political attachment to their country of origin that is demonstrated by their interest in political events at home and through political membership and voting (Tintori 2011; Bermudez 2010). Finally, a number of researchers (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008; Levitt 2003, 2004) also discussed religious transnationalism as a way of belonging to the home country. Levitt (2003) argues that religious identities and practices enable migrants to sustain transnational memberships in multiple locations and by doing so migrants maintain a connection with their native societies.

Existing literature on migration from Bangladesh appears not to have taken much account of the transnational and diasporic lives that Bangladeshi migrants are living in a number of destinations around the world, except in the USA and the UK that both have a long history of Bangladeshi migration and where larger Bangladeshi diaspora communities have already been established (Kibria 2011; Siddiqui 2004; Gardner 1995). However, it would be interesting to look at the transnational engagement of Bangladeshi emigrant diaspora living in European countries, e.g., in Southern Europe, which have

recently emerged as the main destination for Bangladeshi migrants. The scope of this paper is to gain a better understanding of how Bangladeshi migrants in Italy maintain transnational family attachments across multiple destinations not only with the home country but also with several host countries. This study also seeks to understand their diasporic lives by observing how they maintain their ethnic cultural identity within the setting of their host society, as well as analyzing their associational activities. In this paper, I argue that an increasing number of Bangladeshis in Italy are transmigrants 'whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in a relationship to more than one nation-state' (Glick Schiller et al. 1995, p. 48). In addition, using Cohen's (1997, p. 26) proposed criteria of a diaspora, this study argues that Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy have a 'distinctive creative, enriching life in their host society which they perform through tolerance for pluralism'.

In the next section, a brief overview of the context of this study is provided followed by details of the data sources and research methods used in this paper. The third section consists of the empirical part of the study that presents and discusses empirical findings relating to transnational cross border family ties and the diasporic lives of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy. In the final part, a summary of the findings relating to the objectives of the study will be presented, setting out the theoretical background and presenting the implications of the findings.

## 2. The Context

Italy has a long tradition as a country of emigration and very little experience as a place of immigration. It is estimated that between 1861 and 1976, during the unification of Italy, nearly 26 million Italians migrated to a number of destinations; around fifty per cent of them migrated to other European countries while the rest moved to North and South America. Two-fifths of these migrants came from the South of Italy (Del Boca and Venturini 2003). It was not until the late 1960s that Italy emerged as a destination country for both European and non-European immigrants (Zincone and Caponio 2006; Colombo and Sciortino 2004; Del Boca and Venturini 2003). In particular, the oil crisis of 1973 and the introduction of a very rigid immigration policy in Western and Northern European countries was pivotal in turning Italy from a country of mass emigration to one of mass immigration (Colombo and Sciortino 2004; King 1993). During this period, as an immigrant-receiving country, Italy offered standard wages to foreign workers which were often higher than those in France (Del Boca and Venturini 2003). Immigration also increased because of the need for foreign labourers as a result of its demographic decline. This opened up the jobs available to migrants in various sectors such as domestic services, agriculture, construction, small industries, and some other informal sectors (Del Boca and Venturini 2003).

While the UK is traditionally the main destination for Bangladeshi migrants in Europe (Morad et al. 2014, 2021), Italy has recently emerged as one of the major destinations on this continent. It has been argued that the earliest migrants mainly originated from other European countries, i.e., Germany, France and the Netherlands, which had tightened their migration policies and reduced the opportunities for entry and legal residence (Morad and Sacchetto 2020a). In contrast, Italy's flexible migration policy and its periodical regularization procedures have encouraged Bangladeshis to move to Italy from other EU countries to obtain documentation (Morad and Sacchetto 2020a; Morad and Gombač 2018). More specifically, Bangladeshi migrants started to arrive in Italy from the late 1980s, but this grew rapidly from the early 1990s (Zeitlyn 2006; Knights and King 1998) and continues to increase in the present times. Demographically, for instance, according to the estimates of official Italian data, in the 1991 Census, Bangladeshi immigrants living in Italy constituted only around 35,785, which drastically almost doubled (to 73,965) in 2009, and tripled (to 111,223) in 2013 (ISTAT 2017). It is worth mentioning here that, as shown by Knights and King (1998), Bangladeshis were in 40th position in the table of foreigners living in Italy with 5541 members in 1995. However, the most recently published data by the Italian

government's statistics website (for 31 December 2016) have shown that Bangladeshis are the 5th largest non-European community in Italy with 122,428 persons (ISTAT 2017). The number of regular immigrants is projected to reach 232,000 by 2030 (Blangiardo 2010). In addition to this, Italy also hosts some undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants. Thus, today Bangladeshis constitute a significant proportion of the total immigrants in a multicultural Italian society.

In their article, Morad and Sacchetto (2020a) have pointed out that, during the earlier period, the entire Bangladeshi community lived in Rome. In the early years, they faced difficulty in finding a job as well as housing. They mainly worked as street vendors; some of them worked cleaning cars, some walked the streets of Rome selling flowers, umbrellas or jewellery, lighters and packets of tissues. Others stood at the traffic lights selling newspapers. Some worked in restaurants without any regular employment contract (Morad and Sacchetto 2020a).

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study has been carried out using the following qualitative research approach, consisting of in-depth interviews and participant observation. The fieldwork was conducted in two phases, the first between September 2012 and March 2013 and the second between September 2017 and June 2019, in the Italian Province of Padova, Venice, and Bologna. In particular, the empirical material for this research is based on 45 in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi migrants in Italy and 10 interviews with their non-migrant family members and relatives who live in Bangladesh.

Several techniques were used to recruit participants, in particular the “snowball” method. Making use of existing contacts, the author primarily took the opportunity to meet Bangladeshi migrants, such as members of Bangladeshi associations, leaders and students, living in these three Northeast Italian cities. Later, potential interviewees were recruited according to age, gender, profession and religion as well as their region of origin in Bangladesh. Furthermore, those interviewed in Italy helped him to establish links with some of their relatives and family members in Bangladesh so that they could be interviewed. In this study, the majority of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy and family members in Bangladesh were male (40 respondents out of 55). With regard to their migration status, most of them (20 respondents) resided in Northeast Italy as permanent residents while 15 had Italian citizenship and 10 were in the process of applying for Italian citizenship.

The participants were interviewed in different settings depending on what was convenient for them, for example, at their residence or workplace, in shopping centres, mosques and internet cafés or call shops and during family functions and community gatherings. The interviews largely took the form of a conversation to create flexibility for respondents (Kvale 2007) with more open questions (Legard et al. 2003). All interviews with Bangladeshi migrants in Italy and non-migrants in Bangladesh were conducted in Bengali based on their preference. In order to understand transnational links, this study has chosen their social ties (communication and visits) and economic ties (monetary remittances, business investments, circulation of gifts) as mediums of the immigrants' transnational attachment with their family members, friends and relatives who live and remain in their ancestral villages and towns in Bangladesh or in other countries. Furthermore, in order to understand their diasporic lives, this research has chosen their associational activities to learn how different Bangladeshi associations link them as a community with their homeland and help them to maintain their home identity abroad. In addition, maintaining Bangladeshi cultural traditions, eating Bangladeshi dishes, having access to Bangladeshi TV channels and Bangladeshi newspapers, and taking part in religious and political activities, have also been considered as part of their diasporic attachment with the homeland.

Furthermore, in order to conduct participant observation, the author attended various social and community gatherings in both public and private places—religious and cultural programs, birthdays, family functions, and national day celebrations within the Bangladeshi community. He also attended several days of Bangladeshi migrants' gather-

ings taking place in the city bars and restaurants during weekend afternoons. Attending these activities helped this study by providing several first-hand experiences and insights into many aspects of the research objectives. In particular, it helped in collecting relevant information and in cross-checking the findings gathered from the interviews. It is estimated that the total time spent conducting observation was approximately 500 h.

#### 4. Transnational Cross-Border Family Ties

This section, using the voices of the participants, analyzes the everyday transnational cross-border family ties of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy which they maintain with their extended family members (parents, siblings, nephews and nieces), and friends and relatives “back home” in Bangladesh. The first part presents and discusses their transnational social attachment with their country of origin through regular visits and keeping in touch through communication. The second part presents and outlines the findings of this empirical research into economic transnationalism which involves sending remittances and investments back home.

##### 4.1. Social Attachment: Maintaining and Strengthening Familial Bonds

Our participants’ narratives indicated that, as has been suggested in several studies, by comparison with their earlier years in Italy, Italian Bangladeshis today can more easily maintain their social connections with their country of origin due to advances in transport and communication technologies (Faist 2000). Thus, ICTs enable these Bangladeshis to construct transnational social fields across borders (Baldassar 2016; Wilding 2006) through regular conversations with their family, friends and relatives in Bangladesh (Guarnizo 2003; Vertovec 2003; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). For instance, one respondent, who migrated to Italy in 1990, stated the following:

“Until 2000, our communication was mostly dependent on the letter. Sometimes, only once or twice in a month, we talked with our family members over the phone, as this was too expensive. But after 2000, calling to Bangladesh has become cheap. Now communication is so easy. I communicate every day with my mother and sisters”. (Bari, Venice, Italy)

One non-migrant interviewee in Bangladesh also highlights how the transformation of the ICTs (Baldassar 2016; Faist 2000) occurred over the years:

“Earlier, when there was no telephone, they [their family member in Italy] used to send letter to us. This was the case until 1998. If we wanted to talk with them, we had to go to Sylhet city from our village and calling to Italy was also expensive. Now we communicate every day through Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger. We see them and observe what they are doing. This change makes me happy”. (Halima, Sylhet, Bangladesh)

As Halima’s quote highlights, the findings relating to communication with home have revealed the emotional dimension of these transnational practices (Brandhorst et al. 2020; Baldassar 2007, 2016). Their regular conversations negotiate their co-presence by minimising their physical distance. In particular, by staying in touch via long-distance conversations, Bangladeshis remain virtually connected with non-migrant family members and relatives who live in Bangladesh, which provides moral and emotional support, and care across borders (Mas Giralt 2016; Baldassar 2007, 2016). In the conversations, migrants mainly try to inform the ‘weal and woe’ of their family and relatives. Migrants worry about the health, safety, and well-being of those left behind. One interviewee in Bangladesh explained this aspect in the following words:

“As I told you, I am working in the police department. Last week my brother [from Padova, Italy] phoned me three times and asked me to be careful when I am on duty because he is very much worried about the current political situation of my country”. (Burhan, Chotogram, Bangladesh)



These conversations sometimes become necessary when migrants feel homesick and depressed. However, much like the findings of [Withaecx et al. \(2015\)](#), they did not fully reveal their daily hardships during these conversations, since they were concerned about upsetting their parents, siblings or other relatives living in their country. They highlight that even though at the beginning of their migration journey, as an undocumented migrant, they suffered a great deal, their family were told very little about that. In particular, prior to arriving in Italy, some migrants had attempted to settle in other EU countries but were denied documentation. These migrants had to go through a long period of uncertainty concerning their permit of stay and endured many years of precarious work. Yet, they explained very little about this to their family during their conversations. For instance, Atique, who first migrated to Germany in 1997 and later moved to Italy in 2000, recalled his earlier transnational life in the long quote below:

“A few months after arriving in Germany, my father in Bangladesh got cancer. Every month he needed 30 thousand takas [300 Euro] for chemotherapy. As I was irregular, I decided to sell as many flowers as I could, because I had to save some money for my father [ . . . ..]. Communication was not so easy at that time, compared to what we have now; mobile technology was not available, speaking over the phone was very expensive. However, I used to talk on the telephone with my parents at least twice a month. My father would ask me what I was doing in Germany, I never told him that I was selling flowers in the street or in front of the bar or a restaurant. I did just answer them ‘no worries dad and mom, I have a good job here. Please take care of your health’. Because I know my parents would be disappointed to hear that their son with a master’s degree in Physics from Bangladesh works an odd job in Germany”. (Atique, Padova)

The above mentioned four excerpts of Bari, Halima, Burhan and Atique are not just useful illustrations of the ways Bangladeshi migrants maintain emotional attachments with their family members in Bangladesh, but they are also typical examples of how Bangladeshi transnational families achieve intimacy across borders and maintain a sense of virtual co-presence despite being apart ([Baldassar et al. 2016](#)).

Apart from that, the findings have shown that Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy visit their family members, friends and relatives in Bangladesh at least once a year or once every two years for a period that might last from between two weeks to several months. It is worth mentioning that an ‘idealization of the homeland’, a characteristic of diaspora put forward by [Safran \(1991\)](#), was evident in their homeland visits. For instance, findings have shown that most of the respondents wanted to sustain ties with their families, extended kin, and other relatives living in their homeland by visiting regularly. At the same time, they explained that since Bangladesh is their place of origin, they feel strongly bound to it, which also motivates them to visit their natal villages or towns. In this case, they mentioned Bangladesh is their *Shikor* (roots). Respondents who made frequent visits, for example, several times a year, also mentioned that they do so mostly to look after their family business and property in their natal villages and town.

Here Italian Bangladeshi parents often have a personal motive for instilling their children with their culture and traditions and helping their children to nurture their family relationships ([Morad and Sacchetto 2020b](#); [Mas Giralt 2016](#); [Zeitlyn 2012](#); [Mand 2010](#)). This aspect is explained by one migrant in Padova who used to visit Bangladesh along with his family:

“I want to keep my children’s affection for my country; when they grow up they should not forget about the country where their parents and family were born, they should not forget that their *Shikor* [root] is in Bangladesh. They should support their country of origin financially. They should know their relatives in my country. If they visit they will be connected with our culture as they will see many aspects of our Bangla culture in person. For that reason, I visit Bangladesh every year along with my family”. (Kader, Padova)

In this regard, one migrant family member in Bangladesh explained how visits help second generation Bangladeshi Italians in sustaining transnational kin relationships:

“My nephew and niece were born in Padova [Italy]. When they came to visit for the first time they did not recognize us. But, year after year, when they have been coming with their parents, now they love us very much, and while they return, they tell their parents, they don’t want to go back, they want to stay with us in Bangladesh”. (Ferdowsi, Sylhet, Bangladesh)

Furthermore, in addition to the country of origin, Bangladeshi migrants in Italy also maintained periodic communication with their relatives and friends living in other countries in Europe. In particular, as the majority of Bangladeshis in this study arrived in Italy from several European countries, they consequently have friends that live in their first and subsequent EU destinations. Some of my respondents have kept in touch with those migrant friends. In their conversations, they would share many aspects of their daily lives and obtain information regarding available opportunities in order to fulfil their aspirations of further migration. For example, it is mentioned by Atique, who initially attempted to settle in Germany before arriving in Italy:

“I have so many friends in Germany because I used to live there. I am in close contact with these earlier friends. I speak with them sometimes and we discuss our lives in Italy and Germany. During conversations with my friends in Germany, they informed me that Germany provides many opportunities for European citizens.” (Atique, Padova, Italy)

Therefore, as argued by several studies (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Vertovec 2003; Guarnizo 2003), Bangladeshi migrants in Italy kept alive their transnational social ties with their extended family members (parents, siblings, nephews and nieces), and friends and relatives “back home” in Bangladesh and in other countries, through regular visits home and long-distance communication. This transnational social attachment has symbolic and practical importance for ‘sustaining kin relationship[s] across the border’ (Mason 2004, p. 421) and maintaining their sense of being part of a long-distance family by providing moral and emotional support and care across borders (Baldassar 2007; Mas Giralt 2016).

#### 4.2. Economic Transnationalism

In the same way as Guarnizo’s findings (Guarnizo 2003), our interview narratives identified three types of economic transnational relationships that Italian Bangladeshi maintain with their country of origin, e.g., monetary remittances, business investments, and support for local community development. This transnational activity expresses their ‘long-distance social ties of solidarity, reciprocity, and obligation’ (Guarnizo 2003, p. 670) towards their family members, relatives and friends left behind in Bangladesh. In this regard, all of the interviewees in Bangladesh mentioned that their family members in Italy send regular remittances to them. They said that even though their family members live in Italy with the immediate family, they still send a portion of their monthly income to their extended family members, e.g., parents, brothers, brothers-in-law, uncles, and first cousins, who live in Bangladesh. The monthly allowance that is sent to the family members back in Bangladesh is usually used by them to cover family expenditures, medical costs, and educational expenses. However, a large part of the remittances is also used to pay for weddings, buying land and building homes. As two Bangladeshi migrants mentioned the following:

“Every month, I send 30 to 40 thousand [300 to 400 Euro] to my parents”. (Golam, Padova, Italy)

“Before my family [wife and children] arrived here in Italy, I used to transfer almost all of the income that I earned in Italy. But now I sent very little; only 100 Euro every month to my mother”. (Salam, Bologna, Italy)

As Salam’s case illustrates, this is a very similar story to the case of other migrants who used a large part of their earlier remittances to pay the costs of bringing their brothers,

sisters' husbands, nephews and other male family members to Italy. Later, their wives also joined them through a family reunification visa (Della Puppa and Ambrosini 2021). So, in most cases, sending remittances every month is now unnecessary. However, some of my participants still regularly send a part of their income to the country where their parents still live.

"As the eldest son, I am used to taking care of my joint family by sending money. I built a new house by spending around 40 thousand Euro and bought some agricultural land in my village. Now, I do not need to send money regularly since all of my brothers live in the UK and Italy, and my parents are not alive. But sometimes I send some to my sisters in Sylhet. The amount is usually around 40 thousand taka [430 Euro] a year. I think it is their right to ask for money as I am living abroad and I am economically solvent. Besides during Eid festivals, I also send a certain amount to my sisters' families as a gift, which I consider as my responsibility towards them". (Kamal, Padova)

Reflecting Kamal's experience, the interview findings also suggest how important transnational kinship relationships are for Italian Bangladeshis when it comes to the matter of sending remittances (Della Puppa and Ambrosini 2021). Italian Bangladeshis maintain transnational economic ties that may also be with someone outside of their immediate family, such as maternal and paternal uncles, aunts and cousins, father- or mother-in-law and other members of their wives' families (Della Puppa and Ambrosini 2021). These transnational economic ties also connect them with neighbouring people and old friends in their home villages and towns in Bangladesh. For instance, the following statement from one of my respondents reveals the following:

"Yes, I send them [relatives] money when any crisis occurs, such as for medical-related costs and any occasion like the wedding of one of my relatives. I consider this support as my responsibility. I was also poor once. So when I provide this financial help, I feel happy. I might spend 2000 taka [20 Euro] for a relative during a crisis, but it gives me pleasure like I have fulfilled my responsibility to my community". (Atique, Padova)

Atique's story is repeated by the family members of 10 Italian Bangladeshis interviewed in Bangladesh and indicates that remittances are a means of demonstrating care and affection for the families left behind (Della Puppa and Ambrosini 2021). Their narratives highlight that Bangladeshi migrants have a sense of obligation towards their relatives and neighbours in Bangladesh who are suffering economic hardship. When any big financial need arises in their relatives' families, for instance, because of a wedding, a medical emergency, or when one has to start paying for education, these costs are usually met by their migrant families abroad. They mentioned that their migrant family members in Italy also donate to local schools, colleges and Madras. For instance, one interviewee in Comilla Bangladesh explained:

"They are always taking care of us. . . . Our elder brother had a heart attack a few months ago; he was hospitalized in the Appolo Hospital of Dhaka. We needed a lot of money for him. My cousin sent money for his treatment. He is now healthy again. It was possible because they are living abroad. If they live here, it would not be possible". (Karman, Comilla, Bangladesh)

The findings show that some Bangladeshi migrants, who are economically very successful, often send remittances to the poor people in their natal villages as an expression of their strong ties with their country of origin. Nevertheless, although the amount which they send to relatives and others may not be very large, it is a focus for their sympathy, empathy and commitment towards relatives (Carling 2008). For instance, as one Bangladeshi migrant, an entrepreneur in Padova, highlights:

I should help, as I have the ability to do so because those who are in need require help from people like me. For this reason, I spent 10 lakh taka [10 thousand Euro] to build a *Yateem Khana* [orphanage] in my local village [Comilla,



Bangladesh]. Besides, I used to send money to help my poor neighbours, who are unemployed, to start a business. I have also helped my villagers by providing cash for the installation of a deep tube well as they had no drinking water. (Firoje, Padova, Italy).

As [Ambrosini \(2012\)](#) found, in the case of transnational economic family relationships, the circulation of gifts also shows Bangladeshi migrants' transnational care for family members left behind that helps to strengthen family ties.

"Whenever we find someone who is travelling to Bangladesh we send nice things like cosmetics or perfume for my niece and nieces, so they be happy to think that their uncle sends something for them even though he is far away from home. If I do not send something, they may feel sad". (Sahab, Padova, Italy)

Furthermore, all of the interviewees in Bangladesh mentioned that because of the migration of their family members to Italy, there are important material changes that happened in their families in Bangladesh, which they identified as 'family development'. For instance, during an interview in Dhaka, a migrant father mentioned that with the remittance from his two migrant sons, he bought an apartment in the capital city which cost €280k. Another interviewee in Sylhet (Bangladesh) indicated that his uncle who lives in Padova has built a 2 storey building in the city which will cost about €100k. Another interviewee in Comilla (Bangladesh) mentioned that their family built a 3 storey building and bought some land in his local village with the help of his brother who lives in Padova, Italy. In this way, these interviewees recognized that their migrants have a sense of duty towards their families in Bangladesh.

Thus, remittances are an important part of Italian Bangladeshis transnational life. This type of transnational activity helps in the maintenance of transnational family and kinship ties with their family members, relatives and friends left behind in Bangladesh. It is also an expression their 'long-distance social ties of solidarity, reciprocity, and obligation' ([Guarnizo 2003](#), p. 670) towards non-migrants in their family, community or other social groups in their country of origin ([Carling 2008](#)).

## 5. Diasporic Lives: Cultural Ways of Belonging

This section consists of two parts. The first discusses Bangladeshi migrants' diasporic lives in Italy by analyzing their cultural ways of belonging through their links with Bengali culture and traditions. The second part highlights their distinctive Bengali identity that is sustained by forming different Bengali migrant organizations.

### 5.1. Diasporic Attachments to the Homeland

As [Safran's \(1991\)](#), [Cohen's \(1997\)](#), [Brubaker's \(2005\)](#) and [Vertovec's \(1999\)](#) studies indicated, this research finds that Bangladeshi migrants in Italy maintain strong diasporic attachments with their homeland. This diasporic sense of belonging is sustained by access to Bangladeshi TV channels and newspapers, having Bengali dishes as part of their daily diet, and maintaining other Bengali traditions. For instance, in response to my question about how Bangladeshis maintain their Bengali cultural way of life, one respondent replied the following:

"If you were to enter my house, you would know that it belongs to a Bengali family. For instance, inside my home, you can hear the sounds of Bengali songs such as *Rabindra*, *Nazrul* or and other folk songs. Inside my house, you can see that our TV is connected with all the Bengali channels that are broadcast from the UK [ . . . ]. This is because I want to be attached to my *Shikor* [roots]. I get much joy from watching Bangla dramas on TV compared to Italian dramas. My child speaks Bengali. As parents, we ensured that my child would first learn Bengali, as a priority, then Italian. Actually, it is hard to explain why I am protecting my Bengali heritage. I would say, this attraction came from my innermost feelings towards my country". (Atiq, Padova)

Many researchers indicate that the diaspora community has its own electronic and print media in their host setting. The Bangladeshi community in the UK and USA (e.g., Siddiqui 2004), for instance, has set up several Bengali TV channels and newspapers. However, in the case of the Bangladesh in Italy, it was revealed that though they did not set up any ethnic TV channels or newspapers, they maintain strong and close ties with their homeland's TV channels and newspapers that are broadcast from the UK. Findings have shown that by watching Bengali TV they not only become familiar with the day-to-day affairs of their homeland but they also help their children to learn the Bengali language and its cultural aspects. In addition, their strong memories of and hopes for their homeland were also highlighted in their statements (Mapril 2014, 2016) where good news about their homeland makes them happy and bad news depresses them. As two of our respondents explained:

"In my house, I have a connection to all the Bangla channels that are broadcast from the UK. The main reason for this is to get news on political matters, social activities of my country, and overall to know what is going on in my country". (Bhuan, Padova)

"We are working hard and sending remittances home. But, when we see bad news, Hartal, Clash, really these make my mind very gloomy. Sometimes, when we received any good news, for instance, there is a nice park called *Hatir Zil* that was built in Dhaka recently, or that Padma Bridge is under construction . . . all of this news makes me joyful". (Chowdhury, Padova)

Besides, findings have shown that Italian Bangladeshis maintain a connection with their ethnic cuisine by incorporating Bengali dishes in their daily diasporic lives (Parveen 2016). In this case, it is worth mentioning that because of the huge demand for Bengali food among the Bangladeshi community in Italy some Bangladeshis opened Bangla grocery shops while others started farming all types of Bangladeshi leafy and non-leafy vegetables in certain parts of Northeast Italy. For instance, the importance of Bengali food in the Bangladeshis' daily diasporic lives is reflected in the following conversations:

"It [the daily meal] is off course Bangla. My wife usually cooks it. The strange thing is if you ask my child what they would like to eat, they will tell you that they want to eat rice. I never expected it before, but I've noticed that they are becoming accustomed to their parents' food habits". (Swadin, Bologna)

"I have 7 and my elder brother has 4 Bangla alimentary [grocery shop] in Bologna city. My two younger brothers have 4 Bangla alimentary in Ferrara city. We first started with one shop, but our business has been flourishing day by day because of the huge demand for Bangla food among the Bangla community in Italy". (Niamot, Bologna)

It has also become evident from my observations that Bangladeshi migrants in Italy have strong links with their ethnic food. For instance, during a field visit, I rented a room in an apartment where Bangladeshi immigrant workers were living. I found they always had rice with a different curry in their daily diet for lunch and dinner. I have also been invited to eat by some of the Bangladeshi families, where I was served a number of Bangladeshi items. In some families, I have even observed that they have a tradition of chewing *Paan*, a mixture of betel leaf and areca nut as they would traditionally do in their country of origin<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, Bangladeshi immigrants maintain their Bangladeshi identity by preserving their language in their daily lives (Goglia 2021). In this case, they speak Bengali within the community and with family members. They also try to teach their children the Bengali language through conversation and, at the same time, by encouraging them to watch Bangla TV channels. During my fieldwork, while I was visiting some of my respondents' houses, I observed that the children would communicate with their parents in Bengali, even in their local dialects. For instance, Golam, in the extract below, indicates why he feels it is necessary to teach Bengali to the second generation who are growing up in Italy:

“As a Bangladeshi, I communicate with our kids in Bengali, which means, I speak Bengali at home. My kids were born in Italy. We are trying to teach them Bengali because Bangladesh is their parents’ home. If they are not able to speak Bengali, one day they will lose interest in Bangladesh. My objective behind teaching them Bengali is also allowed them able to read Bengali books about our history and tradition. So that they will know about my country. (Golam, Padova)

Apart from the above links, it has also been shown that Bangladeshi immigrants maintain their connections to other Bangla traditions. For instance, field observations have suggested that among Bangladeshi migrants, men wear traditional dress mostly at home, whereas Bangladeshi women always wear traditional dress, inside and outside of their home. In addition, Bangladeshi migrants whom I met also maintain their religious identity in their daily lives and also try to pass on their religious knowledge to their children through religious tutors from Bangladesh.

From the above discussion it can be argued that Bangladeshi migrants in Italy expressed their commitment to retain their Bangla identity by maintaining strong links with their home culture. Nevertheless, they are trying to pass on their identity to their children who are growing up in a different environment from their homeland. These cultural activities demonstrate that they maintain a ‘distinctive creative, enriching life’ in their host country that Cohen (1997) considered as an essential element for creating a diaspora.

## 5.2. Maintaining a Distinctive Identity in the Host Society

Vertovec (1999, p. 3) has explained that since a diaspora contains a collective identity they are “institutionalizing networks of exchange and communication which transcend territorial states and create new communal organisations in places of settlement”. In this regard, the findings of this study indicate that Bangladeshis in every Italian province formed three types of migrant organizations—homeland based, regional-based and religious. Through these associations, they built and institutionalized their networks and communications with their fellow Bangladeshi migrants as well as with their home country. In this connection, Bangladeshi migrants observe all the national days and festivals of Bangladesh, such as Ekushe February (language movement), Independence Day (26 March) and Victory Day (16 December), Boishakhi Mela (fair of Bengali New Year). On these occasions, they follow their traditional rituals, such as for Boishakhi Mela they make a special dish (*Panta Ilis*), at Ekushe February they go to *Shahid Minar* (martyr’s monument) and lay flowers on it. The rituals observed on national days and at festivals could be explained as ‘a Bangladeshi transnational public space’ (Mapril 2014). In addition, programs on national days are also include playing the Bengali national anthem, making speeches, and the reciting of Bengali poems. In this regard, Niamot, President of Bangladesh Samity’ (Bangladeshi Association) in Bologna, stated the following:

“We celebrate Bengali New Year, we organise *Boishakhi Mela* for the Bangladeshi people so that they can enjoy *Boishakh* here abroad. We also observe other national days, 21 February, 26 March and 16 December. Occasionally we bring artists from Bangladesh for musical performances for our community refreshment. In every programme, almost 5000 Bangladeshis get together. We also arrange for various traditional food dishes to be available during these occasions. This way, during the year, our community can enjoy their Bangladeshi celebrations abroad”. (Niamot, Bologna)

As Niamot’s case illustrates, and similar to Vertovec’s (1999) findings, the collective Bengali identity as a diaspora is sustained by activities that are related to their common origin and historical experiences. Even though Bangladeshis in each Italian Province came from a number of districts, historical uniformity unites them in the host society. This unity is expressed through collective work for the homeland as well as for the Bangladeshi Italian community, which they carry out through their associations. In this sense, the most vital example is their project to build a *Shahid Minar* monument<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). This is the third permanent *Shahid Minar* in Europe, which has been built at Breda Park in

Cardonygye, Province of Padova by Bangladeshi migrants (Morad and Della Puppa 2019). The monument is a visible symbol marking a place for Bangladeshis in Padova and is a crucial marker of a collective Bangla identity (Morad and Della Puppa 2019). This Shahid Minar Monument of Martyrs and the rituals<sup>3</sup> surrounding it play an important role in making a Bangladeshi community in the Italian setting (Morad and Della Puppa 2019; Mapril 2014, 2016).



**Figure 1.** The Bangladeshi Shahid Minar monument at Breda Park in Cardonygye in the Province of Padova. Source: Fieldwork (2018).

Moreover, through their regular activities and their associations, Bangladeshi migrants have been found to provide economic support to the people in their Bangladeshi community in Italy. This typically includes financial support to repatriate members of the community after death and for anyone in the community who faces economic difficulties. Some training programs and services are also provided through their associations, these include Italian language courses, computer training courses, and legal support. At the same time, through these associations, they minimize disputes to ensure a peaceful environment in the community. Furthermore, during any type of disaster, they extend a helping hand to their country of origin (Morad and Della Puppa 2019). All these examples demonstrate, that Bangladeshi migrants in Italy are ‘maintaining a strong ethnic group consciousness and collective identity’ and they have a ‘sense of empathy and solidarity with their co-ethnic members’, these being key features of Cohen’s (1997) definition of a diaspora.

It is argued that diasporic consciousness can be created from the bonds of language and religion (Cohen 1997, p. 7). In this regard, our findings showed that the Bangladeshis have established their own religious organization, ‘the Bangladesh Islamic cultural centre’ that can be found in every Northeastern Italian city. The motivation behind establishing these religious centres is to ensure that all religious teaching is in their mother tongue, Bengali (Figure 2). For example, the advisors of the Islamic Cultural Center in Padova, who also holds Italian citizenship explained:

“We established this centre because in Padova we have an Arab mosque where all religious teaching is provided in Arabic. Most of the Bangladeshi, especially our children, do not understand Arabic, so we felt the need for a separate Mosque for



our Bangla community where the religious teaching will be provided in Bengali”.  
(Humayun, Padova)



**Figure 2.** Children of the Bangladeshi community in Padova learning the Quran from a Bangladeshi religious teacher.  
Source: Fieldwork (2013).

As Humayun explained, the regular function of the Islamic cultural centre is to organize daily prayers five times a day and to provide Islamic education for their children. In addition, weekly activities include Islamic lectures on Sundays, teaching the Quran and Namaz every Saturday and Sunday, and *Jummah* prayer on Fridays. Nevertheless, it has been shown that by carrying out these activities, the Bangladesh Islamic Cultural Centre has emerged as a meeting place for Bangladeshi Muslims in this host society. In particular, during the *Jummah* and *Eid* Prayers, there is a big get together of Bangladeshis. Respondents mentioned that this gathering makes them feel at home.

Furthermore, the Bangladeshi migrant associations also organized sports events that are popular in their country of origin, mainly cricket and football matches. It should be noted that some Bangladeshi associations also have their own cricket team. During my fieldwork, I enjoyed one of the matches in Cadonigye city in the province of Padova, where Bangladeshi migrants played against a team of Indian immigrants (Figure 3). During the winter these clubs organize some traditional indoor games (Figure 4). In all sports, young Bangladeshi people used to participate wearing the ‘jersey’ of one of the Bangladeshi national teams.

The above findings demonstrate that Bangladeshis maintain their ‘distinctive identity in the host society’ that several authors have argued is an essential element for a diaspora (e.g., [Safran 1991](#); [Cohen 1997](#); [Vertovec 1999](#)). In this regard, their collective activities in forming migrant organizations reveal their vibrant and distinctive *Banglaness* ([Glick Schiller et al. 1995](#)) and ‘collective commitment to the maintenance of homeland’ ([Safran 1991](#); [Cohen 1997](#)).





**Figure 3.** A cricket match between second generation Bangladeshis and Indians in Padova, Italy. Source: Fieldwork (2013).



**Figure 4.** Bangladeshi youth playing at the 'Via-Rigotti 03', Cadoneghe, Padova. Source: Fieldwork (2013).

## 6. Conclusions

This article aims to offer an original perspective on the literature discussing transnational migration and diaspora, especially that on the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy, by presenting in-depth qualitative research into the transnational experiences of Bangladeshi migrants and their non-migrating families in Bangladesh, which is still an under-researched subject.

The findings of this research have revealed that Bangladeshi immigrants who participated in the study maintain a variety of transnational ties with their family and friends living in their country of origin as well as in different European countries. In this regard, most of them send remittance to their family, relatives, and others who live in their ancestral villages and towns in Bangladesh. Immigrants in Italy still seem to be investing in various sectors of their country of origin. These economic ties keep their transnational kinship relationship alive (Baldassar 2007, 2016). All of the respondents communicate with their extended family members, relatives and friends who live in their ancestral villages and towns in Bangladesh. These long-distance conversations helped them to stay together virtually with other family members and relatives which provides moral and emotional support and care across the borders and has helped them in maintaining long-distance family ties (Brandhorst et al. 2020; Baldassar 2007, 2016). It has also been found that most of the respondents regularly visit their country, Bangladesh, to meet their kin and kith. These visits have symbolic and practical importance in 'sustaining their transnational kin

relationship' across the borders (Mason 2004). Furthermore, they also maintained regular contact and make occasional visits to their relatives and friends living in Europe. In this way, first-generation Bangladeshi migrants in Italy create their own 'transnational social field' through their social, economic, religious and cultural practices across borders through direct and indirect relationships (Levitt and Glick Shiller 2004).

With regard to their diasporic lives, this study finds that in their everyday lives, Bangladeshis in Italy demonstrate various diasporic cultural ways of attachment to their homeland. These are evident from the activities they carry out in their daily lives which focus on retaining their Bangla identity by keeping in touch with ethnic media (like the findings of Siddiqui 2004; Guarnizo and Diaz 1999; Vertovec 1999), having Bangla dishes in their daily diets and maintaining their religious identity (as Levitt 2004 argues). Furthermore, like many other migrant communities (Owusu 2000; Marquez 2001), the Bangladeshi migrant associations in Italy represent their homeland by displaying their national cultural diversity and celebrating all Bangladeshi national days and festivals. In this connection, the Bangladeshi Shahid Minar monument in Cardonogyne, Province of Padova and the Bangladesh Islamic Cultural Centre in every Northeastern Italian city are two visible examples of Bangladeshi symbols and cultural heritage that help to create a Bangladeshi community in an Italian setting (Morad and Della Puppa 2019). The activities of these Bangladeshi organizations express their desire to maintain a distinctive identity in the host society that several authors have argued is an essential element for a diaspora (e.g., Vertovec 1999; Cohen 1997; Safran 1991).

This study also shows that Bangladesh migrants in Italy feel that their second generation needs to maintain transnational and diasporic links with their ancestral country of origin. However, many participants expressed frustration about the way their children were growing up in a kind of Italian cultural environment and have less interest in adopting their parents' culture and tradition. In relation to this, further research should be carried out in order to understand the transnational engagement of second generation Bangladeshis in Italy with the home country and the tensions that exist between first and second generation migrants concerning the transmission of a transnational home identity to the new generation born and raised in Italy.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Paan*, which has been seen as a part of South and South East Asian tradition, is prepared with betel leaf and areca nut. It has been argued that in Bangladesh, all religious and wedding festivals would be incomplete without the inclusion of *Paan*.
- <sup>2</sup> This monument is a replica of the original Shahid Minar which was built outside Dhaka Medical College to commemorate the Bengali students and political activists who were killed by the Pakistani police when protesting against the process of Urduization in East Pakistan on 21 February 1952 (Morad and Della Puppa 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> In Europe, the first permanent Shahid Minar monument was erected in London, the second was built in Bari, Italy (Morad and Della Puppa 2019).

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