

Francesco Della Puppa

A *bidesh*¹ in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea: Biographical trajectories and migration patterns in the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Italy²

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1 Introduction: some theoretical perspectives on migration

The scientific literature proposes three main fundamental approaches to the study of international migration (Ambrosini, 2005; Massey, 2002; Massey et al., 1993, 1998).

The first approach is based on macro theories that connect migration to inciting structural causes (war, poverty, wage gap, economic dependence induced by colonial relations and the capitalist system, growth inequalities, etc.) that would interact with factors of attraction (need of the destination countries for a low-cost workforce vulnerable to blackmail, the segmented structure of their labour market, etc.).

For this current of study, it is necessary to address the issue of growth inequalities and also to define precisely the type and the conditions of work required by the contemporary economy of the countries that are major receivers of migrants (Amin, 1974; Basso, Perocco, 2003; Castles, Miller, 2003; Gambino, 2003; Piore, 1979; Sassen 1998; Wallerstein, 1979).

The second current of study, associated with the paradigm of neoclassical economics, is based on the micro approach, thus putting emphasis on the “protagonism” of the individual (Todaro 1969) and family group (Stark 1991), which are considered social actors that do not passively endure the structural conditions but, instead, are able to make, independently, rational choices related to a possible transfer (Borjas, 1990).

1 In the Bangla language, it literally means “foreign land”, “abroad”, as opposed to *Bangla-desh*, “The country, the land where Bangla is spoken.”

2 The article is a result of a wider research aimed at analysing the process of gender construction of immigrant men from Bangladesh that have reunited with their families in Alte Ceccato.

The third and final current of study consists of meso-level theories which imply that the author maintains a certain degree of independence within the action and deploys an individual (and family) agency, getting by (or having to get by) structural constraints (Boyd, 1989; Faist, 2000; Tilly, 1990).

This paper, with a focus on a specific empirical case, aims at showing how the different dimensions considered by these briefly described theoretical approaches intersect and co-construct each other. It will further demonstrate how structural inequalities at the global level help to shape the ambitions and individual “protagonisms” and networks within which the subjects are moving.

2 Alte Ceccato: From an urbanised land to Italy's North-eastern bangla-town

Alte Ceccato, a hamlet of Montecchio Maggiore, Province of Vicenza, in Italy. Yesterday, the expanse of the fields in a time when working class children were emigrating and the factories could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Today, a globalised place from the Venetian “rururban” sprawl and an industrialised territory hosting one of the world's most important tannery districts: the tannery district of the Chiampo Valley. With a workforce composed of more than 50% of immigrants, the Vicenza tannery district was responsible – until the economic crisis – for 1% of the national GDP, generating 20% of the world production and 70% of the European production, with a turnover of 3 billion euros per year (Finco 2004; Foresti and Tenti, 2006).

This productive system obviously *attracted large sections of the workforce* from all over the country and abroad. This area and Montecchio Maggiore itself are, indeed, characterised by the highest rate of immigrant residents in the entire country (20%). In the village of Alte itself, non-Italian citizens represent about one third of its 6,804 inhabitants, with 50% of them coming from Bangladesh.³

2.1 Across seven seas and thirteen rivers⁴ to reach the Mediterranean shores

Bangladeshi immigration in Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon. Many Bangladeshi started arriving at the Peninsula in the 1980s. This was also due to the

³ Source: Demography office of the Municipality of Montecchio Maggiore.

⁴ *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* is the evocative title of the monograph by Caroline Adams (1987), devoted to life stories of the Bangladeshi pioneers in Great Britain. It was used again in Italy by post-colonial fiction writers (Ali, 2003) and by some diaspora observers (Priori, 2012).

closure of the other European countries' borders, mainly those of France and the Federal Republic of Germany, in combination with the deep economic and social transformations and the political turbulence that was taking shape in the country of origin.

One of the most popular destinations of the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Europe – obviously after Great Britain, the ex-colonial motherland – was, in principal, the Federal Republic of Germany, where it was relatively easy to obtain recognition of political asylum right after the coup of 1975, which has led, in Bangladesh, to the military dictatorship of Ziaur Rahman and his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (Van Schendel, 2009).

In 1979 the German government imposed new restrictions on the granting of asylum and, consequently, migration flows moved from Bangladesh to France by virtue of its relatively welcoming attitude towards political refugees. Furthermore, the election of a socialist president in the Elysée in 1981 inculcated hope for a quick granting of amnesty, attracting even more Bangladeshi migrants towards the French territory. Compared to countries like Germany and Switzerland, which in a few years transformed from easy targets to impenetrable fortresses, France was characterised by a relatively permissive legislation, at least until 1989, when the new Interior Minister, Chales Pasqua, implemented a crackdown on entries into the country.

In the same period the war remembered as the First Gulf War began, which rendered impossible migration towards most of the Middle Eastern oil countries.

These changes reversed migration flows to Mediterranean Europe and the Soviet Bloc. The collapse of “real socialism” made the eastern European countries open to immigration, transforming them into emerging contexts.

Moreover, the relations with the People's Republic of Bangladesh had been intense since the first two socialist governments of *Awami League* – the political party of the first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman, who led the struggle for the national independence from Pakistan, which was gained in 1971. These relations allowed the establishment of scholarships, thanks to which thousands of young Bangladeshis went to the Soviet Union or to other Warsaw Pact countries in order to attend university. Many of them stayed in these countries to pursue entrepreneurial and commercial activities in the years following the Soviet implosion, creating large compatriot communities.

The economic stagnation at the dawn of the post-Soviet era and the growing racism affecting migrants in large Russian cities ended up discouraging many Bangladeshis who, listening to insistent voices promoting great possibilities for economic growth in

the new destinations of the Mediterranean Europe, left Russia to go to Spain, Greece and, especially, to Italy⁵ (Priori, 2012).

2.2 A *bidesh* called Italy

It was in the 1990s, then, that Italy qualified as an important destination: following the 1986 amnesty (Law 943/86, the so-called “Martelli law”) only around one hundred Bangladeshi citizens were granted a residence permit; following the 1990 amnesty (Law 39/90) this figure grew to almost 4,000, and by the early 2000s more than 70,000 had received such a permit (Priori, 2012; Zeitlyn, 2006).

Today the Bangladeshi community represents the sixth biggest non-European community with regard to the number of migrants in Italy, counting between 80,000 and 120,000 migrants (Caritas-Migrantes, 2012; Cologna et al., 2008).

The territorial distribution of Bangladeshis appeared far from homogeneous: until the end of the 1990s they were concentrated almost exclusively in Rome, where, according to the Census of 1991, 92% of them lived (King and Knight, 1994; Knights, 1996; 1998; Knight and King, 1998).

In these years the settlement of Bangladeshis in the capital – encouraged by effective *migration networks* connecting the country of origin, various poles of diaspora in Europe and Italy (Abbatecola, 2001; Ambrosini, 2005; 2006; 2008; Boyd, 1989; Tilly, 1990; Massey, 2002; Massey et al., 1993) – was so fast that it made the community living in the capital one of the largest in Europe, second only after London.

Indeed, a large city like Rome exercised a great power of attraction over migrants for both the presence of compatriots – pioneers of this migration – who were strengthening the networks and offering the first support to newcomers and the fascinating imagery it evoked among the middle class educated youth of the world's peripheries. The *main* reasons were, however, the work placement opportunities in the context of the *informal economy* (services, catering, tourism, small business, etc.) and the *possibility of mimesis* within the dense mesh of the community of compatriots that the metropolis offered to migrants who were *initially without a valid residence permit*.

The 1990s were also characterised by *fragmentation* of the Bangladeshi community and *dispersion* of many *probashi*⁶ across the country. It was characteristic for subjects

5 European countries with “recent” immigration offer relatively good working, social and wage conditions, on account of – especially in Italy – a growing labour market, the structural importance of the shadow economy and the instrumentally lax immigration policies (Basso and Perocco, 2003).

6 In Bangladesh, the emigrants are called *probashi*, which means “external inhabitants” or “those who went abroad.”

without documents to stay longer in the capital, as they depended on the Bangladeshi community and their support. Conversely, the ones that finally came into possession of a valid residence permit left the capital in order to achieve better social, working and living conditions (Knights, 1996; Zeitlyn, 2006).

Thus, various “bangla-towns” came into being in many areas of the Province, offering great possibilities of stabilisation, usually close to major industrial centres with vast employment *opportunities* in northern regions. Alte Ceccato can be included among these contexts.

3 Why going to *bidesh*?

The interviewees belong to the first generation of *probashi* in Italy: young and single, from the upper-middle class, with a higher education qualification. Children of lawyers, landowners, teachers, entrepreneurs, public administration employees, military officers, managers, that grew up in wealthy families in post-independence Bangladesh and that are today working as unskilled workers, inclined to work overtime and categorised under low-profile contracts. The Bangladeshi employed in the tannery district do not correspond to the working class in their country of origin and the work they do in Italy is something “they would never dream of doing in their home country” (Zeitlyn, 2006, 32).

Subsequently, individual and family motivations for immigration will be studied in depth, while acknowledging the structural factors of international migration (Basso, Perocco, 2003).

3.1 Migration as a means of family support and a coping strategy

Migration – especially to the West – represents a road that can be followed only by a small group of relatively well-off candidates, configured, thus, as a strategy to defend one's standards of living rather than a desperate attempt to survive.

In a strongly polarised and extremely impoverished Bangladeshi society, it is essential for the middle classes to defend their standards of living in order to avoid falling within a dispossessed majority group employed in the informal economy and striving every day to satisfy their daily food needs.⁷

⁷ For reasons of space it is not possible to discuss in greater detail the phenomenon of migration from Bangladeshi rural to urban areas (Abrar, Azad, 2004; Abrar, Lama, 2003; Abrar, Seeley, 2009; Khandakher et al., 2012; Siddiqui, 2003), which is often a consequence of climate change (Abrar, 2000; Abrar, Lama, 2003; Afsar, 2000; Ali, 1999; Gardner, 2010; Zug, 2006), structural adjustments

For Reevu, coming from a white-collar family, migration was a compulsory choice following the death of his father, the sole breadwinner of the family. This strategy was the only way to ensure a standard of living to which his family of origin was used, to ensure access to private health care and to keep the door to university education open for the younger brothers.

I have started my MPhil, but haven't finished it. Because when my father died I became the breadwinner of the family, I was the eldest son and all the responsibilities fell on my shoulders and so, for my five brothers, my sister and my mum I gave up the university and I came to Europe. Then all my life changed, suddenly. I don't like this life. I was also a student, I also wanted to have a job that I would like. I did the MPhil, the university, but I didn't find a job. I would like to live in my country, with my parents, with my family. But I cannot because of the "economic management" of the world that does not allow it. It is not only my issue but of the whole Bangladesh. I didn't have a choice.

(Reevu)

Migration, in this case, is considered *in* the family of origin and *for* the family of origin: Reevu cannot and does not want to avoid his responsibilities for economic support that his family attributes to him as a man and as a firstborn. He was forced to emigrate by global inequalities that put Bangladesh into a subordinate position compared to *bidesh* but also by expectations, hierarchies and family obligations.

3.2 Self-downgrading in *bidesh*, self-upgrading "in the country of origin"

Migration can also represent a strategy to defend one's status, which can lead to refusing a job considered inadequate with respect to one's qualification, social status and family prestige. In the rigidly hierarchical and ascriptive⁸ Bangladeshi society, where the legacy of the caste system – common for the social organisation of the subcontinent – still operates today, to work manually or to do work considered inappropriate to one's social background is considered an individual and collective failure which would undermine the honour and prestige of all the family members.

(Chossudovsky, 2003; Muhammad, 2007), privatisation and liberalisation process (Ali, 2007) and expropriations (Afsar, 2000; Ragusa, 2008; Saha, 2000 Zug, 2006) directly or indirectly imposed by international financial institutions and Western corporations.

8 Similarly to the requirements of the caste hierarchy, the social *status* is given according to belonging to a certain family clan. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the debate on (non)existence of a real hierarchical caste structure of the Bangladeshi society is marked by contrasting theoretical positions and empirical reflections (Priori, 2012).

I thought it would be difficult to find work for me in Bangladesh because I did not like to work as a bricklayer or in the tannery, I cannot work in a tannery in Bangladesh.

(Morad)

I studied up to high school, then I didn't start to work: two or three more years of study and I went away. I am not from a poor family, my dad has a little something in Bangladesh, but I have not found a suitable job and so, I came here. In Bangladesh I cannot find the job I studied for, if I find a work, I find a manual work.

(Ali)

Not being “from a poor family” implies fulfilment of specific social and professional expectations that, if they cannot be fulfilled in the country of origin, can push one to emigrate. Experiences lived by a son from a family traditionally working in the trade sector who becomes an employee, or of one belonging to a family of proprietors who moves from a condition ensuring an income not related to work to a condition requiring sale of one's own labour, are exclusively admissible in *bidesh*.

The migrants' moving from the south to the north (and from the east to the west) implies an improvement of their prospects and living standards with respect to those in the society of origin, but at the same time it is a social downgrading in the host society. Economic and development inequalities existing between the context of emigration and immigration entail a change of individual actors' social status: through a physical and symbolic movement the *probashi* moved from being first-class citizens in the “third world” to “second class citizens” – as one interviewee said – in the “first world”.

3.3 For a “first world” quality of life

Despite the downgrading inherent in migration, permanent stay in Europe offers *probashi* living standards that would be unimaginable in their country of origin:

I heard, I read, that in England, in the USA, in Europe the life is more beautiful. For example, the worker of a company, if the company is rich, he is not so rich but he can still buy a car. This is not possible in our country. [...] We are in the third world. For the people from the third world it is not easy to come to the first world. I tried to do it, otherwise life would be difficult, I would not live well.

(Tariq)

Whoever, belonging to a middle class family, comes to Alte Ceccato has access to the living and working conditions of the working class in Europe – which means, in

any case, an improvement in living standards. Indeed, being a worker in Europe makes it possible to achieve some goals difficult to achieve in Bangladesh for the same job placement, while allowing access to a series of securities which would be unattainable in the context of origin.

Rumon, too, highlights the better living conditions in *bidesh*, explicitly stressing the limits of the services in the country of origin, giving particular attention to the health sector. Shantu emphasises the almost total lack of a social security system:

In my country the hospitals work very badly and the quality is low. There are many private hospitals and clinics, like in America, but they are very expensive. Health care is better in Italy. I am getting old and I am thinking about so many things...

(Rumon)

The government doesn't help you there, in my country there is no pension, who works for the government has the pension, but few people work for the government. So I left because I was seeking a future in *bidesh*.

(Shantu)

Daily difficulties are added to the uncertainty about the future: lack of foodstuffs not compromised by harmful substances, the highest population density in the world,⁹ a widespread micro criminality forcing the inhabitants of the major urban centres to self-impose an evening curfew, difficulties in moving and limited infrastructure connections. These are just some factors that compromise quality of life and curtail future achievements.

3.4 Regaining upward mobility

A further boost to migration is fuelled by the desire to regain the upward social mobility that the *probashi* recognise in their family's previous generations and from which they feel they cannot benefit. In order to understand the social immobility of many representatives of the younger generations of the Bangladeshi middle-class, it is necessary to trace the historical, political and economic evolution of the first thirty years of the country.

Bangladesh was founded as an independent state in 1971, after a bloody war of independence from Pakistan. After the initial enthusiasm for independence expressed by many representatives of the national bourgeoisie, the newly formed People's Republic became the protagonist of a systematic program of nationalisation, but also

9 More than 1,000 inhabitants/km² at the national level, 49,000 inhabitants/km² in the capital (Muhammad, 2007).

of a series of coups, military dictatorships and political crises. This has resulted in a long period of instability that – despite the formal establishment of a parliamentary democracy – has lasted until present and that has seen two main political formations alternating in the government, bringing their supporters even to violent physical confrontation (Van Schendel, 2009). Political instability has seen a rise in economic insecurity related to structural adjustments and intense privatisation campaigns imposed by international financial institutions (Chossudovsky, 2003; Muhammad, 2007).

The continuous changes in the political landscape and the deep budget cuts have brought about a climate of profound violence, extreme insecurity and widespread corruption, thus blocking the aspirations of those groups of families who, although possessing means of subsistence and cultural capital, cannot improve their social status. On the contrary, they risk a worsening of their condition.

Following the establishment of military regimes, the industrial and economic growth, and the growth of the education have stopped. Normally it takes five years to finish college but it took me eleven years because the universities were continuously closed by the military government. In the '80s and '90s, there were many problems related to the politics, social problems that have triggered frustration of the younger generations. [...] For this, many people were pushed to leave the country. The migration was the only way to have something done.

(Zaeed)

Migration is configured as a strategy of the middle classes to regain the path of upward mobility blocked by recent historical and political developments and by the radical economic changes that have affected the country. The perception of social immobility can be easily felt in the words of Tariq and Rinku.

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."

(Tariq)

In Bangladesh our dad was not really rich but my grandfather, father of my father, had a lot of land. [...] Here a worker manages to live a normal life. From here, the middle-class cannot come up, cannot come down, it remains stable.

(Rinku)

Significant representatives of the first generations of graduates, a quarter-century since the end of the liberation war and the birth of the country, embark on migration. This way, they can, in Europe, put to use their university degrees and professional skills. However, this illusion is quickly replaced by the reality of having to remain, in the land of immigration, “labourers for life” (Sayad, 1999), unskilled workers excluded once again from all forms of mobility in spite of the qualification obtained in the country of origin.

3.5 Escaping political repression

Not even the formal establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1991 has succeeded in stabilising the Bangladeshi political framework (ivi 2.4). Political violence and the practice of physical elimination of rivals carried out by the military establishment obedient to the ruling party – which alternates between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – represents a daily reality up to the present time, one which has driven many to leave the country.

I was involved in the activities of the Awami League. It all started with two murders. Two leaders of Awami League were murdered. This happened when I was at their house because I belonged to their political group. I had to escape. They were searching for me and I had to change the city. I went to Naria where I had stayed for over four years at my father's cousins' place. There I saw that they were all going to Italy, so I asked my brother if he could arrange my departure for Italy. He managed to get a study visa and I managed to come to Italy. I had to go to Italy because the police and Rab were looking for me.

(Uddin)

These interviewees, who fled the country due to political alternations that would endanger their lives, are undergoing a long process towards regularisation in *bidesh*. The condition of administrative irregularity prevents their comeback to Bangladesh for years, thus forcing them to begin a process of rooting in the context of immigration. On the occasion of their first return to their home country, the *probashi* find a significantly transformed society, even more polarised and with further reduced growth margins for the middle classes to which they belong.

Devoid of social capital to undertake a job or a commercial activity in a context in which, moreover, the cost of living has now significantly increased, Uddin decided to take advantage of the administrative regularity obtained with difficulty to permanently move his life project to Italy, thus prolonging what was initially meant to be a temporary exile for political reasons:

I don't have political problems anymore. [...] It has already been ten years, it was already long time ago and the situation in Bangladesh has changed a lot. But now I have to do something in Italy because I am no longer “compatible” with my country. [...] Ten years ago I could start a business with 500 thousand taka, but now I could not do it even with 5 million taka! Besides, if I return to Bangladesh I have to resume the political activity, but if the Awami League loses again I would have problems again.

(Uddin)

Rahaman, on the other hand, is aware that the years spent outside “the country” has rendered impossible both his inclusion in the labour market back home – because of his age – and a comeback as a leader within the ranks of his party – because of the long absence from the political scene. Moreover, the male breadwinner responsibilities towards the family built in Italy in the meantime do not allow him to give up his current position as a labourer in a chemical factory in Vicenza.

Now the Awami League has won again but I cannot go back to the country because I would not find a job: I'm thirty-five, thirty-six. [...] Now in my country there are no problems. This year the Awami League went up, that's fine, but I lost so many years, it makes no sense to return. I cannot go back and do the “mayor” of my village.

(Rahaman)

The migration of the protagonists of these narrations, albeit represented by themselves as a rough experience due to contingent causes with respect to a precise political picture, has been configured over the years as an irreversible process.

3.6 Getting married “higher”

In a hierarchical and ascriptive society, marriage exchanges occur according to a logic tending towards homogamy. The variables existing in the marriage negotiations, however, constitute the intersection between the qualities attributed at birth and the elements of class distinction. Failure to possess some characteristics acquired through the family of origin can, indeed, be compensated by other possessions that ensure greater negotiation power in the marriage arena.

The lack of job prospects in line with the relevant level of education and the lack of opportunities for social mobility push many unmarried men from the middle class towards the edge of the marriage market. Migration is, once again, the solution to this socio-biographical impasse. Indeed, it transfers to *probashi* the economic power symbolising *bidesh* and reactivates the upward social dynamism, thus improving their position in the marriage market.

The administrative irregularity and the subsequent regularisation accomplished in the framework of migration, however, force them to redefine the marriage project due to the delayed return that it causes, the ageing factor related thereto and, therefore, the inevitable widening of the gap between the *probashi* and the candidate bride. Consequently, the choice of partners is narrowed down but also to be reconsidered at the parental project and the number of children of the couple:

My mother wanted to see me married, she kept telling me to get married. [...] But everything depended on my residence permit in Italy: until I didn't have the permit I had to put off the wedding because I could not go back to Bangladesh.

(Uddin)

When I left [Bangladesh] I wasn't married, I had to do it right away, otherwise I would get old and would get married too late. My mother was always crying because of this. [...] As soon as I got the residence permit I went back to Bangladesh to get married. But it was too late. [...] I got married late because I came to Europe and I managed to go back to Bangladesh only eleven years afterwards. [...] I should have got married a bit sooner, so that my son would be born sooner and now he would be big and could help me when I will be old. If you get married late, you will have kids late.

(Sherif)

The words of the interviewees shed light on the contradictory effects of migration on their marriage trajectories: if, on the one hand, it implies an improvement in their positioning in the local marriage market, on the other hand, the prolonged administrative irregularity during the first years in Europe risks to undermine this event.

3.7 “Seeing the world” and becoming men

Migration represents a passage towards adulthood. The geographical transition from Bangladesh to *bidesh* coincides with the symbolic and biographical transition from youth to adulthood, with establishing a new socio-existential condition.

The difficulties connected to the process of obtaining a valid visa for Europe, the enormous required resources, and most importantly the risks associated with the irregularity of a migratory path, but also the real economic, social and symbolic opportunities contribute to the creation of a mythical and idealised representation of *bidesh*. This contrasts with the sense of immobility and confinement within the narrow perimeter of the native country. Indeed, migration offers an unusual

experience of the geographical mobility through which the world can be observed and life can be lived.

My dad was a geography teacher, he was good at making maps, at drawing a world map. When I was a child, I was studying geography and history with him and he used to tell me: “Look: in the middle of the world there is a country called Sicily, there is a sea, the Mediterranean sea, this sea is in the middle of the Earth. In the middle of the world. When you will grow up, you have to travel around the world, there are so many islands in that sea.” This remained inside my head. Then, I was thinking one day: “Let's see, I will go out a bit, I want to see that world”, but I didn't know that I would be able to come here, up till here, in Italy. For me it was just a dream.

(Rinku)

On the one hand, by virtue of hierarchical relations established between centres and peripheries of the global economy, *bidesh* symbolises the economic and political power and, consequently, the possibility to transform one's social status. On the other hand, it represents an opening towards the outside world and the experience of a world “outside” of Bangladesh.

Such representations fuel what a stakeholder called “migratory fever”. The interviewees frequently use the expression “to see the world”, thus transposing migration to the dimension of a journey.

When I was a little boy I saw a lot of people leaving from Bangladesh. I tell you the truth: I left from Bangladesh because I wanted to see the world, have experience. [...] I thought: “I want to see how it is outside” and so I went out.

(Shantu)

In my country I was fine, I had a good work, everything just fine. But I wanted to travel a bit, see new countries, see how life is in Europe.

(Sharif)

Europe is a dream for generations of young educated people also due to the image of modernity, culture and cosmopolitanism with which it is associated, and due to the possibilities of experiences and self-training that it offers (Ashraf, 2010). It is also the contact with the “outside” world that makes possible the creative act of social magic of transformation of oneself, transferring to the individuals the qualities of which the symbolic universe of *bidesh* is the bearer and generator.

After the migration he became more bright and adult than before. I think that now my brother Rinku is an “international” person, he is able to have a

conversation with anyone, once he was very shy but now he meets people, he is an “international” person. This is a real change.

(Khan)

The *probashi* embody characteristics of modernity and cosmopolitanism in the eyes of those who have no access to diaspora. Sometimes it is the sense of danger, the ability to take a risk and the awareness of the high possibility of failure which feed the personal challenge young Bangladeshi take on in order to prove *to be and want to be* men. They recognise the obligation towards themselves to start their life: “I was not obliged but it was as if I was obliged... because I had to start to live my life!” stresses Hassan.

Migration represents a form of evolution with respect to those who remain in Bangladesh, which allows them to make the acts of social imagination real in Italy and to become aware, as a subject advocate of one's own destiny, of the self-construction and self-perception. Access to *bidesh* constitutes both an opportunity for emancipation from control and family protection as well as an opportunity for freedom from unemployment or an indefinite wait for a job matching one's expectations. The experience of diaspora and economic resources that it has allowed them to accumulate promotes the migrants and makes them move upward in the family hierarchy, attributing to them, thus, a new authority of European income providers.

Considered from this perspective, the first temporary migrants' return to the homeland takes on a special meaning: it marks the end of one phase of life in which migrants are not yet mature men and at the same time opens an existential cycle characterised by their entry into the adult world.

4 Conclusions

To elaborate further the multiplicity of facets of international migration and to fully understand the plurality of underlying forces, it is necessary to strain the structural and individual factors, to observe the interplay between objective causes and subjective incentives, to adopt a historical perspective and to rebuild the political, economic and social evolution among people, nations and continents.

Various authors (Gardner, 2010; Samaddar, 1999) agree that in order to study the phenomenon of migration with Bangladesh as its main protagonist, it is indispensable to go back to the administrative division of the Indian subcontinent (Ahmad, 1975; Van Schendel, 2005).

Indeed, the consequences of British colonialism were so deep that the effects are still felt in the present time (Collotti Pischel, 1973; Panikkar, 1958; Torri, 2000). It has created deep levels of economic and development inequality between the peripheries and centres of the global market (Wallerstein, 1979).

The methods of colonial control and management of the British administration has also led, on the one hand, to the creation of a small privileged elite in the face of a dispossessed majority group in a highly complex system of institutionalized social ranking and, on the other hand, to the exacerbation of social contrasts that have presumably imitated “ethno-sectarian” lines.

These objective elements allow understanding and explaining of the conditions of impoverishment faced by Bangladesh and the origin of the liberation war the country fought against Pakistan to achieve its independence. Such a troubled past could not but develop into an equally unstable present. As mentioned before, the country has gone through a series of coups and a long period of instability, aggravated by a strong economic dependence imposed by international financial institutions.

Consequently, dynamics and structural relations are taking shape which, according to *macro* approaches, represent the basis of migration phenomena: inequalities between nations and continents, desire of economic and social freedom of “ex” colonised nations and labour exporters, the “thirst” of the “ex”-colonisers for a low-cost workforce vulnerable to blackmail.

Within this framework, supported by a very solid structural basis, however, subjective reasons and individual agencies of different actors (as described by the *micro* theories), individuals or families, who put themselves “on the way”, take shape or are shaped, often taking advantage of their own social capital, undertaking and once again producing transnational migration networks – as emphasised by the *meso-level* theories (Abrar, Seeley, 2009; Kibria, 2011; Siddiqui, 2003).

Thus, *in the context of unequal division of work on a global scale*, migration can be configured as a family mandate and a strategy for confronting critical issues that threaten the standards of living of one's domestic aggregate. It can be an opportunity to reactivate upward social mobility or to gain new experiences in a reality offering possibilities of self-training. It can also represent an escape from political violence or a better ranking within the local marriage market, or even a test that one undergoes in order to enter adult life.

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Francesco Della Puppa

Bidesh sredi Sredozemskega morja: biografske poti in migracijski vzorci bangladeške diaspore v Italiji

Ključne besede: bangladeška diaspora, priseljenci v Italiji, migracije, transnacionalizem, družbena stratifikacija, razlogi za migracije

Članek izhaja iz širšega raziskovalnega konteksta, osredotočenega na bangladeško skupnost v lokalnem, visokoindustrializiranem okolju na severovzhodu Italije. Raziskovalno delo vključuje daljša obdobja opazovanja z udeležbo in etnografske raziskovalne prakse tako v Italiji kot v Bangladešu, pri čemer je bilo izvedenih štiriinšestdeset poglobljenih intervjujev z Bangladeškimi imigranti v Italiji in z njihovimi družinami v Bangladešu. Nekateri intervjuji so bili izvedeni tudi z izbranimi relevantnimi pričami in drugimi deležniki.

Fokus raziskave se tako nagiba k dejavnikom (objektivnim in subjektivnim ter strukturnim in individualnim), ki oblikujejo segment bangladeške diaspore, usmerjen k sredozemski Evropi, natančneje, Italiji. Po drugi strani pa je fokus usmerjen k izkušnjam migrantov – večinoma neporočenih moških – in učinkom, ki jih ima migracija na njihove družbene in biografske trajektorije.

Prispevek najprej oriše zgodovinski razvoj izvora respondentov in izpostavi strukturne determinante, nato pa pokaže, kako je lahko migracija izkušena in percipirana kot: družinska strategija soočanja s kriznimi situacijami; ključ do dosega individualne in kolektivne družbene mobilnosti (navzgor); zagotavljanje boljših življenjskih pogojev; pobeg pred politično represijo; način izboljšanja položaja na trgu poroke; pot v moško odraslost.