

Bangladeshi Multi-Scalar Im/mobilities: Between Social Aspirations and Legal Obstacles¹

by ANDREA PRIORI (University Roma Tre)

Abstract

This contribution analyzes data collected during fieldwork from 2007 to 2016 in Rome (Italy), and partly in Dhaka and Narayanganj (Bangladesh), to ethnographically engage with Bangladeshi mobilities. Starting from the analysis of life-trajectories of certain urban middle-class migrants, the paper investigates the relationship between im/mobilities and power on different scales, taking into account both peoples' subjection to regimes of mobility and other structural conditions, and their agency in pursuing projects that intertwine social and geographical mobility. Bangladeshis' multi-scalar lives show that mobility and immobility are strictly interconnected, highlighting the persistent importance of relationship with places, and calling attention to possible affinities between widespread mobility and the neoliberal agenda.

Keywords: Bengal diaspora, Bangladesh, mobility, emplacement, anthropology of migration, transnationalism, ethnography, neoliberalism, mobility capital, urban anthropology

Introduction

Social scientists mainly studied mobility and immobility as separate phenomena during the Twentieth century, but in the last three decades many scholars overcame this binary approach. In the 1990s, anthropologists started to be increasingly concerned with the "interrelationship of moving and dwelling in a world of global interconnections" (Fog Olwig 1997: 19), while, in more recent years, mobility studies have also claimed that "movement and spatial fixity are always co-constituted" (Sheller 2011: 3)². The need to focus

on the relation between mobility and immobility (cf. Alexander et al. 2016), or between transnationalism and locality (cf. Gardner 1995), also informed research on Bangladeshi migrations: *probashi* (the Bengali term for people who live abroad) strictly intertwine movement and stasis, they are simultaneously cosmopolitan and locally rooted, being engaged in multi-scalar dislocations that interconnect neighborhoods, cities, and countries.

attitude to movement. It does not refer *tout court* to "social mobility," except when it is accompanied by an adjective. I also use the plural form, "mobilities," in order to highlight the coexistence of different forms of mobility in the migrants' stories.

Conversely, the word "immobility" stands for the individual (or familial) condition of being geographically fixed in a place. Obviously, just as nobody is completely "mobile," nobody is entirely "immobile," especially if we consider different scales of movement, or extend our analysis to the imaginary of mobility. In this sense, I use the expression "im/mobility" in order to highlight the mutual coexistence and entanglement of mobility and immobility.

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² In this paper, the word "movement" indicates bare geographic dislocation, while "mobility," at a macro level, stands for social processes based on widespread movements (of things, people, ideas) endowed with cultural meaning. When the term "mobility" (or the adjective "mobile") refers to individual persons, it indicates the condition of being in movement or their

This article analyzes three ethnographic cases from fieldwork on Bangladeshi migrations to Italy carried out between 2007 and 2016 in Rome and partly in Dhaka and Narayanganj³. It will show how different forms of mobility and immobility coexist in the same family and in the life-course of a single person, and how people's choices can be simultaneously driven by their social aspirations and constrained by different forms of power on various scales.

Surely, the *probashi*'s continuous dislocations display a widespread yearning for movement, but their life-histories also present situations in which people are unwilling to move, bringing into question the attractiveness of mobility. As Salazar (2010: 54) observes, the necessity to overcome sedentaristic models and nation-based research designs drove some scholars to substitute a "nomadic metaphysics" (Cresswell 2006) to a preexisting "sedentary metaphysics" (Malkki 1992), projecting "movement itself as liberating, valuable" (Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013: 186). In order to avoid participation in this nomadic metaphysics, I take into account Bangladeshi mobilities without losing sight "of the continued importance of place-based practices" (Salazar, Smart 2011: iii; cf. Gupta, Ferguson 1992) and, in general, of people's emplacement.

Starting with the assumption that "it is not movement per se which provides social protection [or affluence], but the relationships that are formed in particular places as the result of movement," (Gardner 2008a: 145), that is, access to the social relations and networks available locally, I utilize the expression "emplacement" to describe a situation in which the subject is "positively situated in a relational landscape" (Bjarnesen, Vigh, 2016: 10). In this sense, emplacement is not a mere question of physical

presence, but it is rather about being successfully entangled in a field of locally hinged multi-scalar relations.

In this contribution, I pay attention to the institutional, economic and social aspects of emplacement rather than to its bodily dimensions, as Englund and other scholars do (cf. Englund 2002; Gardner, Mand 2012). This choice also draws from the work of Katz (2001). Building on the premise that "social reproduction (...) is almost always less mobile than production" (Ivi: 709-710), Katz asserts that after the neoliberal turn national governments tend to exclude migrants from the welfare system, forcing them to be mobile and to cover the cost of the reproductive work in their country of origin. This argument inspired me to consider the restructuring of the Italian job market, which took place in the second half of 1990s⁴, and its reverberations on people's life-trajectories, on their choice to form a transnational family, as well as on their legal situation. Katz's reflections also compelled me to focus on the participation in the welfare system and its relationship with im/mobility, so as to understand whether a successful insertion in the welfare society, together with a stable work position and legal status, necessarily fosters immobility.

Probashi projects undergo "regimes of mobility" that impose "barriers on the emigration and immigration of some individuals and [facilitate] the movement of others" (Glick-Schiller, Salazar 2013: 192), regulating both movement and stasis. The following ethnographic cases show how the legal frame, together with the job market, limit/foster im/mobilities on various scales, and will enable us to observe the way in which people cope with the restrictions, creating routes of circulation that facilitate their movements.

³ I carried out my research as part of my doctoral studies and within research projects in collaboration with University Roma Tre. Participant observation is the primary methodological tool I utilize for this paper. As a way to protect their identities, I altered the names of the people who feature in my contribution and other details that could offer significant clues.

⁴ Beginning in 1997, the Italian government approved a series of reforms aiming to the flexibilization of labour. The government simultaneously abandoned an immigration policy based on relatively permissive amnesty laws and introduced harsher rules. I will refer to this radical change, that resulted in augmented difficulties for the local insertion of migrants, as the "Italian neoliberal turn."

People's lives are influenced by economics and legal factors, which interplay with life-events, and personal and family projects. Analyzing this interplay will allow us to appreciate the weight of both people's agency and the external agency of established forms of power.

Indeed, in spite of the limitations imposed by these structural conditions, people's agency does not disappear. Previous research demonstrated that in Bangladesh even the less fortunate are in some ways able to cope with adversities (cf. Siddiqui 2003; Alexander et al. 2016), and this holds particularly true for the interlocutors of my research. These *probashi* come from urban middle-class families, and do not fit into the typical, penniless representation of the "migrant." They are well educated and relatively wealthy, and they are not simply *subjected to* power, they are also *subjects of* power. In their life-histories, class consciousness and logics of distinction play an important role, together with aspirations of vertical social mobility. In this way, this article examines the interdependence between geographic position and social ranking by observing multi-scalar representations of space that often clearly relate to projects of social climbing.

The middle-class background of the Roman *probashi* is far from being an anomaly in the Bangladeshi diaspora. As shown by Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais (2016), Bangladeshi international mobilities involve people who have enough "mobility capital": "a bundle of capacities, predispositions (...), connections, often rooted in the family and group histories of mobility" (Ivi: 12), as well as "some transferable assets" (Ivi: 56), enabling movement⁵. Whilst networks seem to play a more crucial role compared to socio-economic status per se (Ivi: 75; cf. Gardner

2008a), generally the bulk of *probashi* originate from middle-class families, both rural and urban. This stands true for the agrarian Sylheti little tenants who have been the rank and file of the postcolonial migrations to the UK (cf. Adams 1994; Gardner, Shukur 1994; Mahmood 1995), for those who undertook "short term migrations" towards other Asian countries, whilst they represent the less fortunate part of the diaspora (cf. Siddiqui 2004), and for those who aimed for South European destinations. In Italy, similarly to Portugal and Spain (cf. Mapril 2014; Zeitlyn 2006), Bangladeshi migrants can be organised in two macro-groups: rural middle-incomers, whose families own land and/or other properties (in Rome, mainly from the district of Shariatpur), and people from urban families (in Rome, mainly from Dhaka) who, besides owning properties, have a good educational background (cf. King, Knights 1994; Knights 1996a; 1996b).

Probashi who are discussed in this paper belong to the latter category, as their parents are entrepreneurs or public servants. For them, mobility often represents a strategy of reproduction, or improvement, of a "vulnerable" middle-class life-style (cf. Mapril 2011; Priori 2012a; Della Puppa 2014). They are generally wealthier than their rural counterparts, but access to international migration is, paradoxically, less expensive for them. In fact, while villagers from rural districts spent on average 5,000 Euros to reach Italy, these urban *probashi* simply bought an Italian tourist visa from a broker for a few hundred Euro. They had the connections and know-how to do so, being inserted in networks which already included many migrants. For the same reason (and because of their age), most of them had also been able to seize the right moment to move to Italy, in the first half of 1990s, when Italy presented a relatively permissive legal frame and a labour market characterised by a relative abundance of work and long-term contracts (cf. infra: note 4). This allowed them to establish stronger relationships with Rome, although their emplacement produced unexpected outcomes.

⁵ Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais offer two slightly different definitions of "mobility capital": a definition based exclusively on capabilities, access to networks and skills (2016: 12; cf. Ivi: 249), and a more comprehensive definition which also includes "assets" (Ivi: 56), or "cash" (Ivi: 71). I adopt the second interpretation. It is worth noting that the concept of "mobility capital" is not completely new (cf. Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Kaufman et al. 2004).

Dovi: Reactivating Mobility

The history of Dovi, a 48-year-old woman, illustrates the importance of relationship with places, especially with regard to a “social reproduction” that is still fundamentally “place-bound” (Katz 2001: 716). This ethnographic case shows that both mobility and immobility are at the same time desirable and limiting. People’s projects must face regimes of mobility and structural conditions that do not completely overwhelm their agency but considerably restrain their freedom, together with life-events that seem to perform a fundamental role in Dovi’s case.

Dovi’s life-trajectory interconnects different geographical scales, showing an interrelation between her im/mobility and her expanding agency. She started moving on the international scale as a “dependant” and, once in Rome, she initially lived a neighborhood-based existence. But, in just a few years, she has been compelled by life-events to widen her understanding of the city and lead her family to a “better” and “adequate” position on the international scale.

Dovi was born in a rural middle-income household, and in the 1980s moved with her family from their village to Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, where her parents own a shop. In 1988, she married Mohammed, a Bangladeshi man who was living in Russia, and moved to Moscow. Two years later, feeling unsatisfied with their situation, Mohammed managed to obtain a tourist visa from the Italian embassy. After their arrival in Rome, he applied for an immigration amnesty and immediately obtained a residency permit. Mohammed worked as a cook and achieved a relatively strong economic and legal position thanks to his open-ended contract, while Dovi was unemployed. They rented a flat in the suburbs of Torre Angela, where their children Asif and Abir were born in 1998 and 2000. Dovi and Mohammed both grew up in secular and liberal families and, as she says, consequently “tried to give the children a European based education”: Asif and Abir did not receive an Islamic education, did not follow Bengali language classes, and fully share the lifestyle of their autochthon peers.

They settled in a neighborhood where Bangladeshis were present but not in as many numbers as in Torpignattara (the “Roman Banglatown”). As Dovi says, their plan was to live in Rome not “as Bangladeshis,” but “as Italians,” and although they met with other *probashi*, they mainly frequented “places where Italians also go,” and mingled with individuals of the the local middle-class in shopping centres and leisure centres. Furthermore, despite being Muslims, they chose a private catholic school for their children, as it was considered “the best school in the neighborhood.”

Dovi’s family established an intense relationship with the district. Mohammed worked in the centre, but spent his free time in Torre Angela, while Dovi took care of the children and almost exclusively frequented this particular neighborhood. Although Torre Angela is a working-class suburb with poor living standards, its western side appears more like a middle-class neighborhood. Their house, the school Asif and Abir attended, and the park where they played with friends were all located in this area. In Dovi’s opinion, here the children could live a “clean,” “safe” and “adequate” life, where “adequate” stands for adequate to both her social origins (a peasant family that turned itself into an urban middle-class family) and her aspirations for assimilation into the local middle-classes.

In this period, Dovi only knew of “Torre Angela and its surroundings,” as she lamented years later, but this investment in the local dimension beyond offering a plausible landscape to her social aspirations also provided her with substantial help. In Asif and Abir’s school, she met other families who assisted her in many ways and the parish church in the quarter partly covered the school fees. Moreover, their legal position supported Dovi and Mohammed in strengthening their emplacement, enabling them to access a wide range of local services and various forms of social security.

In 2008, Dovi, Asif and Abir’s life-style changed dramatically due to the death of Mohammed, a life-event that forced Dovi to become the bread-

winner. The death of Mohammed seriously jeopardized her emplacement projects; she obtained a short-term contract as a kitchen hand, which made her legal status and her economic situation very precarious. She started to worry about the annual renewal of her visa and had to move. She had to share the new flat with other foreigners, which she considered disappointing and inappropriate.

At the same time, Dovi focused less on the Torre Angela area and instead considered life in the entire city. During the day, she worked in the centre while her children stayed in Torre Angela. They were cared for by the local recreation centre, the school, the parish, and her neighbors. At night, she returned to the suburbs to be close to her sons. This shift reflected her changed role and her new personal situation. As the breadwinner, she also started to frequent municipal offices located in the city centre and she faced legal problems that reminded her she is a “migrant” in Italian law, not an urban middle-class woman. She also started to attend community meetings in Torpignattara, where, in 2009, she fell in love with Mamun, a fifty-year-old Bangladeshi man.

Unfortunately, Mamun was not able to solve Dovi’s legal and economic problems. He could not include her in his residency permit as a “dependent” because he was, by law, still married to another woman. In addition, he already had two children and could not economically afford to support two families in a city “as expensive” as Rome. In 2010, the lack of financial means together with legal obstacles eventually persuaded them to form a transnational family: he would stay in Rome (Torpignattara), where he owned a shop, she would move to Bangladesh, in a place more fitting for the needs of her sons.

In Mamun’s opinion, his neighborhood in Narayanganj was the best available place to raise their children, but Dovi wanted to preserve an urban middle-class lifestyle and, considering Narayanganj too rural, she eventually convinced Mamun to base their new family in Wari, a gentrified quarter in Old Dhaka. Here she has largely reproduced the class-related form of life she led

in Torre Angela before Mohammed’s death. She stopped working and found an “adequate” and “clean” flat in a modern building, quite similar to her house in Torre Angela. Asif and Abir are still registered in “the best school in the neighborhood,” a private Bengali-English school, a typical option for Bangladeshi urban middle classes with transnational ties, especially in sight of a re-migration or a study sojourn abroad (cf. Gardner 2008b). In this way, and also through a style of consumption which includes western food and visits to amusement parks and shopping malls, she established a modernised, middle-class identity again in Wari. In Bangladesh, Dovi also maintained the same im/mobility pattern as in Torre Angela. While living in Rome, she concentrated her life in her neighborhood and used the rest of the city mainly for leisure and shopping. In Dhaka she uses the urban space in a similar way. Wari is a sort of hideaway from the chaos and the smog of the Bangladeshi capital city, a ‘safe place’ which she leaves just to reach other islands in the city, such as theme parks, shopping centers and relatives’ houses⁶.

As Mamun is now more mobile, and spends about six months of the year in Bangladesh, the opposite is true in Dovi’s case: she only returned to Italy once since her departure. However, her investment in the international mobility seems to be stronger than Mamun’s. In fact, he plans to close his shop in Torpignattara in the next few years and to rejoin his birth family in Narayanganj⁷. In contrast, Dovi looks at her return to

⁶ Dovi’s use of space resonates with traditionalist concepts about women’s “curtailed movements” and “(relative) confinement to particular places and spaces” (Gardner 2002: 205; cf. Zeitlyn 2012; White 1992; Mandelbaum 1988). This “relative confinement” relates to expectations about women as caretakers of children and, above all, about their exclusion from the job market. Significantly, once Dovi became the breadwinner, she considerably widened her knowledge of the city, and when she got married to Mamun and stopped working, she returned to a more limited use of the space. Nevertheless, it must be noted that her relative confinement also reflects the material conditions of Rome and Dhaka.

⁷ Mamun has a long story of mobility in Bangladesh, Latvia, Russia and Italy. Notwithstanding this, he al-

Dhaka as a temporary step (a step back in reality) and aims to move again. In 2012, she got in contact with a cousin who lives in Montreal and applied for a migration visa to Canada. For Dovi, a transfer to Canada would represent an "improvement," mainly "for the children," who could avail themselves of "better universities," "better welfare," and a "better job market." But, for Bangladeshi citizens, it is difficult to enter Western countries, even if they have close relations there. In 2014, bureaucracy stopped this new mobility: Dovi's application was deemed "incomplete" and she was compelled to reapply. Currently Dovi, Mamun, Asif, and Abir are still waiting to hear the good news from the Canadian immigration office.

Dovi's history shows that the choice of a place or a pattern of mobility is not necessarily definitive nor voluntary. As Gardner demonstrated (2002; 2009), attitudes towards mobility and places significantly change with the passage of time. Projects and desires modify themselves under the pressure of ageing and household development processes, and on the basis of historical processes which, in our case, take the form of adverse structural conditions. Initially, the situation in the job market in Rome and the legal frame facilitated her local insertion, but in 2008, when her life dramatically changed, she encountered worsened conditions that contributed to her return to Dhaka. Similarly, the legal frame has a fundamental role in preventing her from moving to Canada, and in making her feel trapped in Dhaka. Nevertheless, these external powers do not automatically determine Dovi's life. She tries to cope with these limitations using her kinship network and has not abandoned

ways dreamed of his neighborhood in Narayanganj "as the place where [he] will experience [his] twilight years and as the locus of [his] spiritual and emotional needs" (Gardner 2002: 22; cf. Fog Olwig 1997). This attitude surely relates to the idea of getting old, but it also has to do with shifting historical conditions. Significantly, as a result of his concerns about the political (and environmental) situation in Bangladesh, Mamun recently stated that "Bangladesh is no more a good place for raising up children."

her quest for "better places." Her trajectory is rather an unpredictable product of the interaction among her projects, the economic and legal landscape, and life-events that in her case reactivated mobility on various scales.

Dovi realizes a multi-scalar process of ranking that represents space as a non-neutral entity, categorising neighborhoods, cities and countries on the basis of the social aspirations she nurtures for herself and for her children. In Rome, she favoured Torre Angela over Torpignattara because it was not a place for migrants. On a smaller scale, she concentrated her life in the wealthier sector of her neighborhood. Also in Bangladesh, places are not all the same, and different locations can influence the educational model and her sons' futures, giving them access to different social relations. On the regional scale, Dhaka is more "adequate" than Narayanganj, or her village of birth. On the urban scale of Dhaka, she projects on Wari her transnational middle-class consciousness, while on the international scale she prefers Italy, and above all Canada, to Bangladesh. In Dovi's discourse, "the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces" (Gupta, Ferguson 1992: 8), a feature which we will find again in the next life-trajectory.

Nazir: the ease of moving

Nazir's history shares many common points with Dovi's story. Nazir also leads a multi-scalar life, ranking the various places according to his class consciousness and social aspirations. At the same time, this second ethnographic case introduces new aspects of the interplay among personal projects, life-events and structural conditions. If Dovi has been constrained to revise her local projects partly because of a tragic event, Nazir seems to be in "constant search for new destinations" (Gardner 2008a: 136). He never stopped thinking of a better place to live, for him and above all for his sons, irrespective of life-events.

Nazir has a relatively comfortable situation in Rome and has settled down in his neighbor-

hood even more profoundly than Dovi and Mohammed. Like Mohammed, Nazir has built his emplacement around an open-ended contract that has enabled him to obtain a solid legal position, a stable income and full participation in welfare. In addition, he has established strong political connections, and obtained through these connections a deeper knowledge of Italian civil society.

This advantageous situation contributed in leading Nazir and his family to the acquisition of Italian citizenship, a step that might have apparently further fostered their emplacement in Rome, solving their legal problems definitively. On the contrary, “naturalisation” reactivated mobility in Nazir’s family, opening doors to the European Union, thanks to a kinship network that links different countries.

Nazir is a fifty-year-old *probashi*, and his family is from Komilla, a city in Southern Bangladesh, but moved to Dhaka when he was young. Whilst his father was a prominent functionary, Nazir was not interested in a career in the public administration and could not find suitable alternatives in Bangladesh. Thus, in 1990, when he heard about an imminent amnesty law in Italy, he bought a tourist visa from a broker and headed straight for Rome. He immediately obtained a residency permit and then an open-ended work contract as a manual laborer in the construction industry. A few years later, he married Hasina and moved from Torpignattara (a ‘Bangladeshi quarter’) to an apartment in Centocelle, a neighborhood in the eastern outskirts where migrants mingle with working-class and middle-class autochthons.

Nazir and Hasina carried out an educational model quite similar to the one employed by Dovi and Mohammad. Their children Kausar and Babu (born respectively in 1994 and 1997) did not receive a religious education and regularly frequented the neighborhood. Hasina and Nazir also concentrated most of their lives in the quarter. Hasina did not have a job and Centocelle was important for her, primarily because of her commitment to the children’s education and her relations with other Bangladeshi women (cf. *Infra*:

note 6). Nazir, on the other hand, prioritized community issues. The firm he was working for had many building sites in Central and Southern Italy, and Nazir constantly moved around the country as a pendular worker for many years. Nevertheless, he always spent the bulk of his free time in Centocelle, maintaining a strong interest in the local activities of the Bangladeshi community. In 2009, along with other activists, he established two Bengali schools in the neighborhood, and became the president of one of them.

Nazir’s personal and political connections exceed the Bangladeshi community’s network. In Centocelle, he is also popular with Italians, is a member of the *Partito Democratico*, and has used this connection to empower himself and his association. The *Partito Democratico* provides the space for the Bengali school and his ties with its prominent activists have allowed Nazir both to widen his knowledge of Italian law and politics, and to emerge as the leader of his organization.

However, despite apparently being deeply rooted in Centocelle, Nazir’s family members demonstrated a wider approach to their projects. In 2014, they obtained Italian citizenship and their first-born child Kausar moved to Leicester, where his mother found him a job in a factory thanks to her relatives. She moved in with Kausar and they rented a flat in Leicester where, two years later, Babu also joined them, in order to continue his education at a British university. Just like Dovi with Canada, Nazir also perceives the UK as a country that can offer his sons more opportunities in the educational sector as well as in the job market, “because Italy is a good place to live but England is better.” Nevertheless, his family has not completely severed its ties with Rome: Kausar and Babu maintain their relationship with their peers through virtual social networks, while Nazir has remained in Centocelle, because of his work and his dedication to the Bengali school.

Unexpectedly, in the same year Babu left Italy, Nazir experienced a significant setback to his professional career. In 2016, he was laid off work and started receiving unemployment benefits. Many

of his friends lost their jobs once the economic crisis hit Italy in 2007, and Nazir is rather pessimistic about the possibility of being re-employed by his old firm. Notwithstanding this, he has not altered his projects. He is certain he will stay in Rome as long as he can obtain unemployment benefits, and he is also confident about the future. Since 2016, he has obtained more and more work commissions from private clients in the neighborhood and his economic situation is stable. Moreover, thanks to his Italian citizenship, he has now definitively solved his legal problems. Thus, Nazir is not sure he will leave Rome. He seems determined to exploit his social network in the city further and perceives Leicester as a sort of safety net. What seems to matter for him is that his sons are in the UK, removed from Italy's precarious job market.

While the reactivation of mobility works as a kind of coping strategy for Dovi and her family, it is different for Nazir's family. Their mobility was not prompted in response to an external situation or to life-events, but was simply due to their desire to locate the household in the best place among those available in the kinship network.

Both Nazir's and Dovi's stories show a constant overlapping between different forms of mobility within the same household, a recurrent feature in the Bangladeshi mobilities (cf. Alexander et al. 2016). Nazir also interconnects different scales. He is rooted in Centocelle, where he intensively cultivates his investment in the local space, but for many years moved continuously around Italy, and between Italy and Bangladesh. Since 2016, he stopped moving on the national scale but added the UK to his patterns of international mobility.

Moreover, Nazir and Hasina interpret the urban space on the basis of principles that openly recall the approach maintained by Dovi. While Dovi's family was mainly based in a limited section of Torre Angela, a gentrified sector, Nazir and Hasina frequented a similarly established place on the northern side of Centocelle. Many urban middle-class Bangladeshis live and raise their children in this area, which, not coinci-

dentally, is where all the local Bangladeshi associations are based and where community events and other activities usually take place. In this way, this part of the neighborhood is constructed as a place imbued with identitarian meaning.

For both Dovi and Nazir, meaningfulness of places does not exist in and of itself, but is constructed "within hierarchically organized space of unequal relationships." (Hastrup, Fog Olwig 1997: 7), and "in close relation to (...) centers of power" (Ivi: 9). Thus, multi-scalar hierarchies among different places are experienced by *probashi* on the basis of their relationship with these centers. For example, class-consciousness operates spatial distinctions that imply social distinctions, and oppose the centre of the city to the outskirts, but also different quarters and different areas in the neighborhood. The same is true in the ways in which Canada or England can be compared to Italy and evaluated as "better" or "more powerful" countries.

In Nazir's case, if the circulation on the urban scale depended mainly on his buying power, his international mobility faced limitations created by the legal frame that partly disappeared when he changed his legal status. In his case, the acquisition of citizenship opened the doors for both local insertion and international mobility, at least inside the European Union, widening the alternatives at his disposal.

In the two life-trajectories so far considered, im/mobility significantly intersects with gender. Initially, these heterosexual couples (Dovi-Mohammed, Dovi-Mamun, and Hasina-Nazir) seemed to follow a traditionalist interpretation of the relationship between gender and mobility: the men were more mobile, while women were more focused on getting settled in their neighborhood (cf. *infra*: note 6). In both cases, however, if the man organised the first migratory step (and in Mohammed's case, also the second one), it is woman who organised the next step, coordinating it with the reproductive work at a lineage level. Besides showing the women's pivotal role in maintaining relationships between places and between different households, this turnover

also seems to relate to the acquisition of a “more active and mobile role” by aged women (Gardner 2002: 139).

Maruf: Trapped in mobility

It is not by chance that many of those who tried to focus on Rome and on their quarters belong to the first generation of *probashi*. As previously outlined, people like Mohammed and Nazir found better legal and economic conditions that allowed their families to insert themselves locally thanks to a stable income, long-term visas, and access to the welfare system. This does not mean that those who arrived in the second half of the 1990s or later did not have the chance to insert themselves locally, but they did have objectively less opportunities than the pioneers (cf. infra: note 4)⁸.

After the neoliberal turn in Italy, many migrants are aware that it is not easy to take root in the Peninsula, and consequently do not try to realise a deep local insertion. Maruf, a forty-year-old man who arrived in Rome at the end of 1990s, is among those who follow the pattern of pioneer migrants (cf. Eade et al. 2006) and do not even try to concentrate the whole family in the same city. A choice that in the vast majority of cases entails a traditionalist interpretation of the relationship between gender and mobility: the men migrate to Rome, women and children stay in Bangladesh.

Maruf also leads a multi-scalar existence. His life characterizes itself by a pendular mobility between the capital city and Northern Italy, as well as by periodic trips to Bangladesh. Unlike

Mohammed and Nazir, when Maruf came to Rome, he found a precarious job market and harsher immigration laws. He could not obtain an open-ended contract and consequently did not gain full access to social rights. For the same reason his legal status is also highly precarious, Maruf continuously alternates between the statuses of “illegal” and “legal migrant.” Therefore, his im/mobilities are even more problematic compared to Nazir or Dovi.

His work conditions urged him to build a stronger relationship with the national scale. Just like many itinerant sellers and seasonal workers, he lives Italy as a wide urban sprawl, ranking different places on the basis of his experience in the local job markets. Moreover, he looks at the Roman territory with different eyes compared to the other people I have taken into account. Having split his family between Italy and Bangladesh, Maruf is relatively free from familiar concerns in Rome, and does not evaluate its neighborhoods according to their socio-economic characteristics or to the needs of his children, but sketches a leisure-centered map of the urban space.

Maruf was born to a middle-class family in Dhaka, where his wife Misty and their children live, supported by his family of origin. In 1997, feeling dissatisfied with his life as a university student, he decided to move to Italy and procured a tourist visa through a friend. Once in Rome, he worked in restaurant kitchens and, in 1998, obtained a yearly renewable residency permit. However, since 2005, Maruf has been unable to find suitable conditions in the local job market. He found his first job in Northern Italy, thanks to the help of another Bangladeshi friend. He then started working as a waiter or as a chef’s assistant in upmarket hotels in the Alps or in other popular tourist destinations. His current work is based on short-term seasonal contracts that last no longer than six months. Consequently, Maruf has no residency permit for at least six months of the year and he is supposed to leave Italy as soon as his contracts expire. Sometimes he conforms to the rules and uses this period to be with his family, but often he remains in Italy, moving

⁸ Among the Bangladeshis involved in my research, those who arrived in Italy after the second half of 1990s are generally less rooted in Rome and, in many cases, have split their family between Italy and Bangladesh. Notwithstanding this, a large minority succeeded in their local insertion. For example, Mojnu arrived in Italy in 2005 and immediately found a job in a grocery store in Centocelle. In a few years, he obtained an open-ended contract and, in 2012, he got married with a Bangladeshi woman. In 2013, after his first son was born, his wife and child joined him in Rome, where they currently live in a middle-class flat in Centocelle.

from Northern Italy to an overcrowded “bachelor’s house” in Torpignattara (cf. Priori 2012b). He feels “safe” from the police there, as Rome is a “secure place” in his opinion, especially when compared to other Northern Italian cities.

During his stays in Rome, Maruf often lives as if he is on holiday. He does not have a full-time job; he earns a little money with occasional work and has plenty of free time to spend with his friends. As he maintained his wife and children in Bangladesh, Maruf, has less of a need to engage with the local community. Consequently, he does not evaluate Rome because of the opportunities the city can offer his children or for the cleanliness of the neighborhoods, but for the appeal of its night life and its women. In this way, Maruf offers a deeply gendered representation of the city. He constructs a masculine middle-class identity “based on desire” (Mapril 2014: 701) by underlying his participation to a widespread leisure-based lifestyle. He does not show the climbing austerity of other urban middle-class *probashi* who devote most of their time towards building a “better” future for their family and evaluate the urban space on the basis of this concern. He has the appearance of a young local autochthon and, while in Rome, he leads an existence in some way comparable to that of a university student. Thus, Maruf describes a map of bars, clubs, public squares scattered around the eastern side of the city, where scuffles or unforgettable nights of fun with friends take place. In his leisure-centric ranking of the Roman neighborhoods, Maruf favours Pigneto, San Lorenzo and Torpignattara over Centocelle and Esquilino because of the attractiveness of their bars.

Shifting to the national scale, he establishes a second interpretative key based on work opportunities. He prefers Northern Italy over Southern Italy and Rome, which he considers a “bad place” for work. At the same time, Maruf reads the urban scale and the national one on the basis of a third key. As touched upon, he also evaluates the space according to his personal safety from police checks, favouring Rome over Northern Italian cities but also the Eastern outskirts of

Rome (and particularly Torpignattara) over the city centre.

Obviously, Maruf’s multi-scalar geography includes Bangladesh too, and particularly Dhaka. This seems to introduce us not only to a third spatial dimension but also to a third existential dimension. For Maruf, Dhaka represents a place related to family, in his words “my house” (cf. *infra*: note 7), but his mobility on the transnational dimension is subject to harsh limitations. He travels periodically to Dhaka, where he spends about two months a year, but needs to coordinate his movements with his constantly changing legal status. When he has a residency permit that will allow him to freely travel to Bangladesh and return to Italy, Maruf is working in Northern Italy and cannot travel. When he is done with his work obligations, he cannot travel to Bangladesh unless he has found at least the promise of a new contract. He would otherwise run the risk of being trapped there, as he is not allowed to return to Italy without a visa. This alternation prevented him from returning to his family for many years.

The legal frame deeply affects Maruf’s trajectory on different scales. His international movements are limited and expose him to the risk of being trapped in Bangladesh. When he remains in Italy without a residency permit, he tends to avoid Northern Italy and is virtually confined to Rome. In the urban territory of the capital city, he is forced to illegally reside in Torpignattara and he looks at the city centre as a “dangerous” place. The job market also limits his im/mobility, influencing his choices. He is forced to move around Italy in search of new opportunities to make money, although he did not expect to cope with this situation when he arrived. He likes living in Rome, but his job insecurity discouraged an emplacement in the city, also because he does not have access to all the social security benefits that people with open-ended contracts have. The very choice to form a transnational family seems to be inevitably connected to the conditions he found in Italy, and to the lack of opportunities to settle down, an aspect that the anthro-

pology of migration already stressed in the 1970s (cf. Meillassoux 1975), and which provoked some scholars to compare the transnational migrants' condition to that of the *gastarbeiter*. In this respect, Maruf's family fully experiences the "emotional costs of transnationalism" (Gardner, Grillo 2002: 180).

Maruf's story sheds more light on the issue of constrained life-trajectories. He avails himself of greater freedom with respect to the reproductive needs of his family, but undergoes greater limitations to his im/mobility compared to Dovi and Nazir. Nevertheless, subjection to external systems of power does not automatically produce a pre-established life-trajectory, but it does affect it in peculiar ways, interplaying with opportunities, mutable statuses and choices that do not always respect the conditions established by these systems. Structural conditions do not completely overwhelm *probashi's* agency, people continuously attempt to overcome the settled limits. If Dovi and Hasina used their kinship networks to move in the international space, Maruf uses his friendship network to move around Italy, and to hide from the police.

Conclusion

The use of an ethnographic standpoint enabled us to observe an interdependence between mobility and immobility. The mobility of some members of the family engenders "pressures for others to stay behind" (Alexander et al. 2016: 22), while at the same time "people who are mobile (...) are of great importance to the more settled" (Hastrup, Fog Olwig 1997: 5). The superimposition of different forms and scales of im/mobility we observed demonstrates that *probashi* do not choose between movement and stasis, and the very distinction between mobility and immobility is purely heuristic. Movement often resolves itself in a search for new moorings, while a strong emplacement can result in new dislocations.

Moreover, looking at mobility from the perspective of those who want to be immobile, and *vice versa*, it was clear that neither movement or stasis are desirable in themselves

(cf. Massey 1993; Faist 2013). Mobility can entail new (or old) forms of exploitation (cf. Salazar, Smart 2011), acting as a Foucauldian dispositive which produces "normalized mobile subjects" (Sheller 2011: 2). At the same time, immobility is often perceived as a constriction. Some may feel trapped in a neighborhood, in a city or in a country, while others are forced to move against their will.

People's projects must face harsh limitations on the various scales, primarily because of the persistent role of the nation-state, which institutes, and limits, "migration" as an aberration in a "natural" order (Sayad, 1999; cf. Smith, Guarnizo 1998; Ong 1999), dividing the field of mobilities into enclosed areas (cf. Glick-Schiller, Salazar 2013). Nation-states institute regimes of mobility that, besides limiting people's "motility," their capacity "to be mobile in social and geographic space" (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004: 750), it also limits their *immotility*, or their capacity to insert themselves into the local sphere. Nazir's life-history demonstrated that obtaining a stable legal status or gaining citizenship guarantees both the right to move and the right to settle, and provides access to a nation-based welfare system.

The legal frame created by national governments significantly interact with a second external agency which drives and limits people's im/mobility, the job market. *Probashi's* legal position strictly relates to their work situation. Those who arrived in Italy in the second half of the 1990s or later found a post-Fordist job market and obtained short-term contracts, which weakened their legal position as well as their economic situation, and contributed to create forced im/mobilities, splitting families on the transnational scale. In this respect, Maruf perfectly realizes the model outlined by Katz by maintaining the rest of his family in the "world periphery," and Dovi has also been partly compelled to split up her new family because of the Italian neoliberal turn. But these are not assumed results. As in Mojnu's case (cf. *infra*: note 8), *probashi* are not automatically excluded from obtaining a strong position that allows them to start a fam-

ily in Italy just because they are late in moving. Structural conditions influence life-trajectories, and interplay with projects, personal situations and life-events, but the result of this interplay is unpredictable.

This does not exclude the individuation of general trends: if Nazir follows a pattern of mobility that has been demonstrated to be a widespread trend among Italian Bangladeshis in recent years (cf. Della Puppa, Sredanovic 2017), Maruf and Dovi adhere to Katz's model. Moreover, if we consider, as Gardner and Mand do (2012), a "periphery" not only as the "world-periphery," but also the various peripheries which proliferate on different scales, such as the urban outskirts, we inevitably notice that the reproductive costs are almost always transferred to the periphery.

Nevertheless, people's agency maintains an important role in coping with external powers and in constructing the space. People we took into account often overcome the settled limits, establishing moorings and routes of circulation by using the most effective part of their mobility capital, that is kinship or friendship networks which give these urban middle-class *probashi* a conspicuous advantage over their rural counterparts, who seem to rely more on their economic resources (cf. *infra*: Introduction). As we have seen, if those who split their families between Italy and Bangladesh seem to be less inclined to project on the space an aspiration for social climbing, others sketch multi-scalar geographies of prestige in which "places are hierarchically arranged, at both global and national levels and access to these different places is central for the construction of status and economic hierarchy" (Gardner 2008a: 136; cf. 2008b). Space incorporates geometries of power into which my interlocutors try to insert themselves, in a search for a mutual coherence between their geographic position and their socio-economic position, and in the hope of realizing an ideal trajectory complying with "cultural representations of mobility (that) almost automatically link voluntary horizontal or geographical mobility with vertical (...) 'climbing'" (Salazar 2010: 54). On the basis

of this logic, after marriage, people move from a "Bangladeshi quarter" to a gentrified quarter, or perceive a return to their motherland as a step back. They immediately start to plan further movements towards a country they consider more prestigious than Italy. This process was often started by the former generation, which relocated from the village to Dhaka.

In this way, *probashi* perform their agency not only by aiming to reach the best possible place to live, but also in creating their own space, so as to "exercise at least some control over the definition of their own—and others'—identity" (Sørensen 1997: 161). Someone, like Dovi and Hasina, voluntarily concentrated their life in a specific sector of a neighborhood in order to domesticate the diversity of multicultural suburbs, aiming to filter the social differences and to protect her children from poverty and from the identity of "migrant." Whilst they are pushed away from the city centre through processes of socio-economic exclusion and gentrification (cf. Okely 1997), people reconstruct their own centres by virtue of the same processes, in Centocelle, in Torre Angela, as in Wari. In this sense, the stories we took into account demonstrate that "coercion and agency" are not necessarily "in an antithetical relationship" (Gould 2017: 416), at least for the most fortunate migrants.

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Note on the Author

ANDREA PRIORI teaches in the Master in Public Anthropology at the University Roma Tre. His research interests include transnational migrations, migrants' self-organization, welfare politics, politics of identity and immigration policies, masculinities, racism, bio-politics. Since 2007, he has been carrying out ethnographic research into Bangladeshi migrations towards Italy (*Romer probashira*, 2012).