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## Bangladeshi immigrants' self-organization and associationism in Venice (Italy)

Claudia Mantovan<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*In Italy, most of the studies on immigrants' associationism and participation have concentrated on the more formal and structured aspects. Little research has been done on forms of immigrant self-organization not oriented towards the society in the country of adoption. Drawing on these considerations, this article analyzes the self-organization of Bangladeshi residents in the municipality of Venice considering both their infra-political and their politico-organizational mobilization, seeking relationships between these two spheres of action, identifying transnational bonds, and dynamics linked to the social and political context of their home country. At the same time, the study considers the influence of other factors, such as the social, political and economic context found in the country of immigration (at both national and local level), and also the personal variables that can influence people's participation, such as gender, generation, social class, amount of time spent in the adopted country, legal status, formal education, human capital, attitudes and personal projects in general.*

*Keywords: Bangladesh; Immigrants; Self-organization; Associations; Venice*

### Introduction

The topic of immigrants' political and social participation has been increasingly attracting the attention of researchers. In Europe, it is largely since the end of the 1980s that it has been the object of several publications (by way of example, see Rex *et al.* 1987, Wihtol de Wenden 1988 and 2001, Drury & Rex 1994, Bousetta 1997, Soysal 1997, Kastoryano 1998, Statham 1999, Cyrus *et al.* 2005, Schrover & Vermeulen 2005).

In Italy, studies on immigrants' associationism and participation can be divided into three broad lines of research. Some focus on their participation through institutional channels in the various local advisory organizations for foreigners or, for EU immigrants, in local elections<sup>2</sup> (e.g. Giannetti 1993, Attanasio & Facchini 2004, Caritas Italiana 2005). Others investigate foreigners' self-organization and associationism (e.g. Campani 1994, Danese 1998, Berti 2000, Caponio 2005, Caselli 2006, Palidda & Consoli 2006, Camozzi 2008). Then there are the "mixed" contributions that consider various types of participation in institutions, trade unions, associations, movements, and so on (e.g. Kotic & Triandafyllidou 2005, Pizzolati 2005, Semprebon 2012, Oliveri 2012, Lotto 2015).

This literature suffers from a limitation in that most of the studies have concentrated on the more formal and structured aspects of associationism and immigrants' participation. Little

<sup>1</sup> Claudia Mantovan, Università degli Studi di Padova [University of Padua], Italy. E-mail: [claudia.mantovan@unipd.it](mailto:claudia.mantovan@unipd.it)

<sup>2</sup> In Italy, immigrants from countries that are not part of the European Union are not entitled to vote, not even at local elections, so the only institutionalized political participation that can be analyzed in their case revolves around the advisory bodies for foreigners.



research has been done on forms of immigrant self-organization not oriented towards the society in the country of adoption. Some authors have described this form of mobilization as *infra-political*, and emphasized the importance of studying it as well in order to understand immigrants' *politico-organizational* mobilization oriented outwards and aiming to influence the political agenda (Bousetta 2000). Further analyzing the infra-political dimension of immigrants' self-organization also helps to shed light on their transnational bonds with their country of origin, and how they interact with the association dynamics in their adopted country. It is worth investigating whether and how any experiences of involvement in political groups and associations in the mother country influence the way immigrants (especially first-generation) organize themselves in their adopted country (Danese 1998). This should obviously be done without taking a deterministic and essentialist stance, but always considering the influence of other factors, such as the social, political and economic context found in the country of immigration (at both national and local level), and also the personal variables that can influence people's participation. The latter range from the classic issues of gender, generation, or social class to the amount of time spent in the adopted country, legal status, formal education, human capital, and also attitudes and personal projects in general.

Drawing on these theoretical considerations, in this article concerning the self-organization of Bangladeshi residents in the municipality of Venice<sup>3</sup> we analyze both their infra-political and their politico-organizational mobilization, seeking relationships between these two spheres of action, identifying transnational bonds, and dynamics linked to the social and political context of their home country. Our contribution includes findings from one of the earliest studies to be conducted in Italy on this national group (Mantovan 2006 and 2007), and from another study conducted many years later that also partly concerned Bangladeshi self-organization in Venice. In all, we held fifteen semistructured interviews between September 2003 and June 2004, then five between June 2012 and February 2013, and one in-depth interview with an expert witness to refresh the picture in December 2018. Our expert witness is a Bangladeshi met at the time of our first study with whom we have developed a relationship of mutual trust over the years. A participatory observation activity was also conducted between 2003 and 2004, and then on and off between 2005 and 2014, largely during meetings arranged by the various Bangladeshi associations at the time of Bangladeshi national holidays.

### **Bangladeshi immigrants' self-organization**

The model of political and social relations in Bangladesh is characterized by a hierarchical structure that, among other things, expresses a binary classification largely taking shape in a distinction between the *borolok*, or "big people" of wealth and status, and the *chotolok*, or "small people" of low wealth and status (Thorpe 1978, Rozario 1992, Bal 2016). This makes "horizontal" forms of solidarity very sporadic, while "vertical" bonds of patronage are one of the most effective adhesives in the structuring of Bangladeshi social networks (cf. Knights 1996 - cit. in Priori 2012a). The country's social and political system is steeped in what some authors (Rabbee 2019, Kochanek 1996, Eade 1989, Gellner & Waterbury 1977) have called patron-client relations, based on influential figures who dispense favors and act as charismatic

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<sup>3</sup> Though it focuses on Venice, the analysis also takes into account the findings of other studies conducted by the author and others on Bangladeshi associations in other Italian cities.



leaders. Patronage creates bonds of trust on purely personal grounds between individuals on different levels of the social hierarchy. It engenders relations characterized by an asymmetrical exchange of goods and services and an unbalanced distribution of power, generally within the rhetorical frame of friendships or family ties (Gardner 2001). These elements give rise to the personalism and partisan features typical of the politics of states in southern Asia. Leaders are chosen not for their political programs, but on the strength of their charisma, which derives from various factors - including their family of origin, hence the dynastic phenomena seen in politics, in Bangladesh (von Welck 2001) as well as in India (Dickey 1993).

That Bangladeshi social networks are based largely on patron-client bonds is partly reflected in the ways immigrants of this nationality become self-organized abroad, in *bidesh* (Eade, Fremieux, Garbin 2002)<sup>4</sup>. Their leaders are often none other than the patrons of a given group<sup>5</sup>, and their associations are generally (also or only) the manifestation of various patrons' desire for self-affirmation and of the rivalry between them. That is why outside observers notice two features of Bangladeshi associations: they are hypertrophic (ultimately because of a "tendency to create as many structures as there are leaders in circulation" - Priori 2012a, p. 287, our translation); and they are often in conflict with one another. Various researchers have encountered these same features, both in the major national associations in Rome<sup>6</sup>, and in other Italian towns and cities with sizable Bangladeshi communities like Monfalcone (Quattrocchi *et al.* 2003), Treviso (Mantovan 2007), Vicenza (Della Puppa 2017), Padova (Morad & Della Puppa 2018), or Mestre and Marghera<sup>7</sup>, as we shall see below.

## Political groups

In 2003 and 2004, there were already several informal groups associated with Bangladeshi political parties in the municipality of Venice. One group of around 100 supporters of the

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth adding that, as mentioned in the first section, the model of political and social relations at home does not have a deterministic influence on people from Bangladeshi (or immigrants in general). It interacts with contextual elements in the adopted country, as well as with other factors (such as individuals' personal characteristics). Comparing the situation of the *probashi* in Rome and London, for instance, episodes of speculation and exploitation relating to the immigrants' accommodation and employment are far more prevalent in the former city. They reflect the practices of the *murghi* and patronage of some Bangladeshi in relation to their countrymen living in more precarious conditions. Unlike what happens in the UK, in Rome the lack of real estate accessible to immigrants of limited economic means, the paucity of institutional control (e.g. the absence of policies to combat real estate speculation, and the gradual disappearance of council housing from the city's master plans), and the illegal migrant status of almost all *probashi* in Rome when they first arrive all contribute to a marginalization that paves the way to phenomena of exploitation among co-nationals (Priori 2012b).

<sup>5</sup> Leaders are seen as such on the grounds of characteristics such as: their influence deriving from a high social status in their home country (based on variables such as having been part of the *mukti bahini* - the "freedom fighters" - during the war of independence in 1971, boasting connections with influential people, having been a political party leader at university, or having occupied local or national political appointments); being wealthy; having been in the adopted country for longer, and knowing the territory and institutions; having links with influential people and groups in the society of the adopted country; being of older age; the city and/or district of origin; and academic qualifications. Prestige is also acknowledged a "situational" nature, depending on the setting for the social interaction and the identity of the parties involved. Status is "ultimately based on elements the social actors can objectively demonstrate rather than on abstract principles or presumed genetic certainties" (Priori 2012a, p. 104, our translation).

<sup>6</sup> To give an example, Bachcu won the elections to the presidency of the "Bangladesh Association of Italy" in Rome in 2003, but the outgoing president Kibria refused to acknowledge the electoral result, and his supporters continued to consider him the legitimate holder of the "historical" symbol of the association. This led to a separation, prompting the virtually total disappearance of the symbol of the "Bangladesh Association of Italy" and the emergence of a second association called "Dhuhumcatu", with Bachcu as its president (Priori 2012a).

<sup>7</sup> Mestre and Marghera are part of the municipality of Venice, but on the mainland, while the historical city center is on islands in the lagoon. The majority of Venice's Bangladeshi live in mainland Venice (where accommodation is less expensive), and are employed in the industrial sector (including the shipyards), and the service sector (especially tourism, mainly in Venice's historical city center).

Jatiya Party was led by Faruk<sup>8</sup>, an entrepreneur in the shipbuilding and restaurant sectors who has been in Italy since 1986. Another group of approximately 250 people supported the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the *Jubo Dol* (the young people's section of the BNP). In absolute terms, however, the party that has the largest number of supporters among the Bangladeshis in Venice is the Awami League (AL). This is largely because Shariatpur, the district of origin of around half of the Bangladeshi residents in this area, shares a border with the area where the founder of AL (Faridpur) came from, so it is an important electoral catchment area for this party at home. In Mestre, there was a group of supporters of the *Jubo League* (the young people's section of the AL), and two or three separate groups of AL supporters - in conflict with one another and with different leaders<sup>9</sup> - totaling about 400 people altogether.

When interviewed in December 2018, our expert witness reported that this type of self-organization "still exists, and is still strong" in Venice, but the numbers of people involved seem to have dropped by comparison with his earlier estimate. Our interviewee thought there were around 200 supporters for both of the main parties, AL and BNP. The group of Jatiya Party supporters no longer exists because its leader (Faruk) was appointed president of both the "Bangladesh Association in Venice" and the Bangladeshi Islamic Association in Mestre. A group supporting the Jamaat-e-Islami has been established, "but they use another name; outside Bangladesh they do not engage in activities under the name of Jamaat-e-Islami, but they are the same people". On the whole, the number of Bangladeshi people involved in all these various groups is very low, considering that immigrants of this nationality officially residing in the municipality of Venice as at 31 December 2018 amounted to 6,570 (source: Venice Local Authority).

These political groups are genuine lists, their members appointed by the leaders of the political groups in Rome, who in turn are chosen directly by the political leaders in Bangladesh, giving rise to a profoundly structured and hierarchical organization that unfolds on an international scale. The criteria adopted by Bangladeshi political party members to choose these political group leaders in *bidesh* seem to relate mainly to social status: leaders must be very obviously wealthy and have many "clients". As emerged from several of our semistructured interviews, political ideology clearly has nothing to do with the choice of leader. In fact, the current presidents of the groups supporting the AL and the BNP in Venice are two brothers, a situation that reflects the above-described features of Bangladeshi politics.

The political groups of *probashi* in Italy seem to engage in two main activities: organizing celebrations for Bangladeshi national holidays<sup>10</sup>, on a par with other informal or formal associations of immigrants of this nationality (see below); and maintaining relations with political leaders in Bangladesh to obtain personal, material or symbolic gains. The benefits to

<sup>8</sup> All the names of our interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.

<sup>9</sup> In commenting on the divisions within the Venetian groups of the AL, one interviewee explained the underlying mechanisms, which relate to the dynamics mentioned in section 2: someone who has the right credentials (because they are rich and/or well educated, for instance) opposes the "official" leader, demanding the same status. That is how the AL group in Rome was split between two leaders (both from Shariatpur). The division stemmed from the fact that the AL in Bangladesh has two different political orientations that divide its organizational framework into two parts, creating a dialectic that is reflected in Italy too. Opposition between the two political persuasions is very strong in *bidesh* too, and can sometimes even give rise to physical confrontations, as happened in October 2009 when the two sides briefly engaged in a stand-off in the district of Torpignattara in Rome (Priori 2012a, p. 268).

<sup>10</sup> These events are attended by around 800-1000 people.



those acquiring political appointments in *bidesh* can apparently be “spent” mainly in their mother country (as examples, interviewees mentioned being able to get an early appointment with the Prime Minister, or avoiding taxes in Bangladesh). The same seems to hold for political leaders using these “appointments” to win the electoral support of members of emigrants’ families still living in Bangladesh.

Such informal groups of supporters for Bangladeshi political parties seem to be the most specifically transnational form of self-organization for immigrants of this nationality, as confirmed by this excerpt from an interview:

I went to their meetings lots of times. They talk about politics ... [...] But for about 10 years now the BNP and Jubo Dol in Venice haven’t been very active because the AL is in government in Bangladesh. If the people here say something against AL, the AL here informs Rome, Rome informs Dhaka, and Dhaka informs where they lived in Bangladesh and calls the police, causes trouble, gives their family problems ... “I can’t touch you here in Italy, but you’ll see the police turning up at your home in Bangladesh tomorrow”. They do this kind of thing too, it’s very nasty (Sakil, a hotel employee in Venice, 2018).

### Single-nationality associations

The first formal Bangladeshi single-nationality association in the Venetian area, called the “Bangladesh Association in Venice” (BA), was established early in 2003. It was followed less than two months later by another, the “Bangladesh Welfare Association” (BWA), at loggerheads with the first. The dynamics behind the emergence of a second single-nationality association in conflict with the first (as often happens with Bangladeshi associations) were complicated by the links to the internal workings of the political groups. The conflict between the BA and BWA ultimately came down to the fact that, as we mentioned earlier (in footnote 8), the group supporting the AL in Rome was split between two leaders, and this division was reiterated in its Venetian counterpart. The BA was established by members of one of the two rival political groups within the AL in response to the fact that only the other group had been formally acknowledged by one of the two political leaders in Rome. Then the BWA was established in “response” by the other group.

In this first phase of Bangladeshi associationism in Venice, a very important part of the activities of these organizations of *probashi* (primarily the single-nationality associations, but also the political groups and regional associations<sup>11</sup>) was to organize the celebration of national holidays and events. The most important dates in the Bangladeshi calendar are: 21 February (*Ekushey February*, Mother Language Day); 26 March (Independence Day); 16 December (Victory Day); and *Boishakhi Mela* (Bengali New Year, which in Bangladesh coincides with the start of the monsoon season). These dates are still celebrated today and remain an important part of the activities of Bangladeshi associations in Venice and other Italian cities. They are extremely popular with their countrymen, who usually arrive in their hundreds, even from

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<sup>11</sup> Regional associations are established on the grounds of members’ place of birth, delineated by the formal boundaries of the district or village where they grew up. In the municipality of Venice there are about 10 such associations representing the principal areas of origin of Bangladeshi living in the area (and covering the districts of Shariatpur, Dhaka, Comilla, Chittagong, Chandpur, Barisal, Khulna, and the village of Bhairb, which is part of the district of Kishoreganj). They are all informal groups and tend to have a smaller membership and more limited activities than the national Bangladeshi organizations.

other provinces, revealing a remarkable capacity for self-organization and extraordinary networking.

Organizing “programs” (as the Bangladeshi call them) to coincide with national holidays appears to be partly as a means of self-affirmation for one of the many small political groups and associations competing for prestige and power in their communities<sup>12</sup>. The “programs” also seem to be an opportunity to reconstruct and confirm these people’s belonging to an “imagined national community” (Anderson 1983) by remembering and “sacralizing” (in the sense used by Durkheim) the people and historical events that led to the birth of Bangladesh<sup>13</sup>.

The core role of the language question in the fight for Bangladesh’s independence from what is now Pakistan<sup>14</sup> seems to justify the particular importance attributed by many *probashi* to ensuring that their children learn their mother tongue. While the call for the construction of a monument to the martyrs of the language in a public space has yet to be satisfied in the municipality of Venice (unlike what has happened in other Italian cities<sup>15</sup>), providing Bengali language courses for children is the main mission of the “Venice Bangla School” established in 2007. This association also offers help with schoolwork and organizes sports and recreational activities for young Bangladeshi, such as cricket tournaments in the public parks, as well as organizing its own “programs” for Bangladeshi national holidays.

Its president, Aktar, is an entrepreneur<sup>16</sup> from Barisal. He is also part of the local Bangladeshi Islamic Association, and a reference for his countrymen when someone dies and they want to send the body back home<sup>17</sup>. Aktar is well known in Mestre, partly thanks to his good

<sup>12</sup> Whatever the occasion being celebrated, the format of these events is always much the same. A large space is rented (such as a theater, open-air amphitheater, sports center, or community center) to contain the mass of spectators that always turn up. It is held from late afternoon until about 10 p.m. on a Saturday or Sunday. Two or three posters with the name of the association or political group organizing the event are hung on the stage, along with the name of the anniversary being celebrated. The first part of the meeting is always “political”: Bangladesh’s national anthem is sung, then various people take turns to present the political group or association members who organized the event, and speak about the event being commemorated. This part can last from 20 minutes to an hour and a half. It is followed by entertainments, with musicians and dancers on stage. These artists often arrive from other Italian cities, and sometimes even from Bangladesh.

<sup>13</sup> Other recent studies also mentioned how “the establishment of Bangladeshi associations, mainly homeland-based ones, are aimed at the preservation, expression and transmission of ‘Bangladeshi culture’” (Morad & Della Puppa 2018, pp. 6-7). The authors underscored how, by celebrating the various national holidays and festivals relating to their shared origins and history, these Bangladeshi immigrant organizations strive to maintain strong “transnational ways of belonging” to their homeland, enabling migrants to retain their cultural roots (Morad & Della Puppa 2018).

<sup>14</sup> As Quattrocchi *et alii* (2003, p. 117, our translation) put it, “the role of the language as an indistinguishable and nonnegotiable trait of one’s own identity was a fundamental element in the battle for independence from Pakistan”. The Ekushey February (a national holiday that commemorates four young students killed in Dhaka on 21 February 1952, during the war of independence) is actually one of the most important national anniversaries in Bangladesh, so much so that the *Shabeed Minar* (monument to the martyrs of the language) is reproduced on some of the country’s coins (like the 2 *taka*). That is why it is common for associations of *probashi* to organize Bengali language courses and even to establish organizations with the sole purpose of teaching the mother tongue. In 1999, the UNESCO declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day.

<sup>15</sup> Like Rome (where an official commemorative ceremony has been organized by the Bangladesh Embassy on International Mother Language Day since 2011, the year of the monument’s inauguration), but also Bari (since October 2010) and smaller towns like Cadoneghe, near Padua.

<sup>16</sup> After running an internet point in Mestre for several years, he is now the owner of a restaurant in the town.

<sup>17</sup> The reasons that prompted Aktar to get involved in the association (often paying out of his own pocket for the activities he organized) seem to echo the dynamics driving others who reach a certain social status (because they have become entrepreneurs, for instance - as in his case - and have established relations with exponents of the local institutions and associations): they wish to accredit themselves as “patrons” by engaging in acts of generosity designed to ensure their countrymen’s acknowledgement of their prestige. The following excerpt from an interview clarifies the concept:



command of Italian, as he arrived many years ago (he has been in Italy since 1989), and married an Italian. He could therefore be among what we once described as “visible immigrants” (Mantovan 2007): people who, by virtue of many years in the adopted country, and a considerable human and social capital, have been accredited as key reference figures in local society<sup>18</sup>. The fact that many Italians automatically label such “visible” immigrants as “representatives” of all their countrymen stems from a need to “contain the complexity” of the country’s immigrant population. This leads exponents of autochthonous institutions and organizations to pressure immigrants of a given nationality to appoint a single representative. It has the effect of making us fail to acknowledge the stratifications within national groups. There is a tendency to unduly ethnicize their social participation, and make their associationism and political representation overlap (Mantovan 2013), fomenting the internal divisions in single national groups between the “visible immigrants” and those who feel they are not represented by them.

Other interviews revealed how generational and gender variables, as well as those relating to place of birth<sup>19</sup> and family reference group, are factors that differentiate between Bangladeshi immigrants. The associations seem entirely alien to most of the women, who have sometimes described them as strictly male<sup>20</sup> and dominated by personalism. In 2011, the “Bangladesh Youth Association of Venice” (BYAV) was established for young Bangladeshi wishing to create an autonomous space for themselves on a local level. The idea was promoted by a young man called Rajib, originally from Dhaka, who was 24 years old at the time. But, by 2014, the BYAV had practically ceased to exist because Rajib had been pressured by his parents into marrying and already had two children, so his priorities (and the time he could spare) had to change.

The BWA is also inactive now because its last president emigrated to Britain, while the BA still exists but does virtually nothing apart from organizing the Bangladeshi New Year

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“I earned a lot of money, I helped a lot of people [...] and that’s why I think I’m doing something that will always remain. I want my name to be remembered for my children so that, when I’ve gone, they will go to some party held by the Bengali community and people who knew me will say, ‘This is that man’s son’. So that’s the name I want to leave in the community, and that’s why I will always do what I can for the community as long as I live.” (Aktar, owner of an internet point in Mestre, 13 June 2012) On his Facebook page, under “information”, Aktar has listed a series of charitable works he has funded in Bangladesh (e.g. building schools through a foundation he belongs to, helping the poor, providing support after natural disasters like the Sidr cyclone in 2007), and in Italy (e.g. organizing transport to Bangladesh for the bodies of the deceased, participating in numerous associations in Rome and Mestre, and organizing a march when a young Bangladeshi man was killed in a fight in 2010).

<sup>18</sup> He has several things in common with Bachcu, the current leader of Dhuumcatu in Rome, who – partly because he was twice married to Italian women – is one of the few *probashis* with an excellent command of Italian. The latter’s ability to serve as a *trait d’union* with the autochthonous civil society also makes him the object of an “overexposure in the media that enables him to literally crush his direct competitors on the political scene” (Priori 2012a, p. 276, our translation), and the same applies to Aktar.

<sup>19</sup> Some interviewees claimed that the fact that various past and present leaders of Bangladeshi associations in Mestre came from Shariatpur (like the first president of the BWA, or the current president of the BA and of the local Bangladeshi Islamic Association, and the vice president of the BA) is because there are numerous Bangladeshi from Shariatpur in the municipality of Venice, and they tend to support leaders coming from their own area. This factor certainly plays a part, but interacts with other elements like the capacity to establish relations with local society. For instance, although he comes from Barisal, the president of the Venice Bangla School is an important reference figure for both Italians and part of the Bangladeshi in Mestre.

<sup>20</sup> A recent study on Bangladeshi women in Rome (Carnà & Rossetti 2018) showed that their presence in the associations and groups related to political parties at home is far from negligible (as concerns the latter, for instance, there is the Mohila Awami League, or female section of the AI). The authors also wrote, however, that – when allowed to speak at public events – the women do so only as exponents of the female condition, as if to underscore that it is right for them to be there to only adjust the gender balance. Other research conducted in Rome mentioned women finding opportunities to take part in Bangladeshi associations, performing as singers, preparing food to be eaten during the meeting, and having a space to socialize outside the home, i.e. generally in subordinate roles that cannot compensate for the obvious imbalance of power between the conditions of men and women (Priori 2012a).

celebrations. The BA is presided over by Faruk, a very rich and influential member of the community (ex-leader of the political group supporting the Jatiya Party, as mentioned earlier, who is also president of the local Bangladeshi Islamic Association), a role that is merely formal<sup>21</sup>.

That Bangladeshi associations dissolve when their leaders move away (and, as Sakil put it, the BA only still exists “because Faruk is there”) goes to show once again that, by and large, they are not really the place for members’ democratic participation, but only the direct emanation of a particular leader. As other research has shown, these associations usually appoint people in various roles, but they often have “functions more formal than real”, and are “occupied by members particularly zealous in serving as uncritical clients of the president rather than in participating in the association’s activities” (Della Puppa 2017, pp. 67-68, our translation). A real step forward in the quality and durability of the associations, and especially the services they provide, is only made by those whose leaders are capable of establishing durable relations with local civil society (Priori 2012a). This is the case of Aktar, whose “Venice Bangla School” is - unsurprisingly, according to various interviewees - the only Bangladeshi association in Venice now that really works, providing useful services for *probashi*, particularly in matters of education and recreational activities.

## Conclusions

The findings of this research on Bangladeshi self-organization in Venice show that the theoretical contributions mentioned at the start of the article are still pertinent. They emphasize the importance of analyzing immigrants’ self-organization not just in its more formal, structured and visible expressions oriented towards the society in the immigrants’ adopted country, but also in its more “hidden” aspects. The latter involve instances that focus more on transnational bonds and the dynamics of the social and political world of the immigrants’ home country. It is essential to understand these elements to be able to interpret some of the dynamics playing out on a politico-organizational level.

Analyzing the social context from which the *probashi* came enabled us to better understand some of the features and activities of the Bangladeshi associations in Italy. It revealed how the first-generation immigrants’ social behavior in political groups and associations in Bangladesh is partly responsible for the proliferation of Bangladeshi associations, the numerous internal conflicts, the difficulties these organizations have in creating a “horizontal” space of authentic democratic participation, and really helping to meet the needs of their countrymen. With the exception of the educational and recreational activities provided mainly

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the following excerpt from an interview:

- The BWA is dead and the BA only exists because there is Faruk [...]. What have these two associations done for the Bengali community? Nothing. Nor do they wish to do anything. They are only there to say: “I’m the president”, and so on. Once a year they do the Boishaki Mela. Basically they throw a party [...]. Faruk doesn’t do anything. He just says, “I’ve got no time. You do it. You want the money? Here, take it, so long as you don’t bother me, do what you like”. We’re good friends, he tells me, “but I can’t spare the time”.

- THEN WHY DID HE WANT TO BE PRESIDENT, JUST FOR THE PUBLICITY?

- Yes, a bit of publicity... If any need crops up here, at police headquarters, or the prefecture, they look for whoever is president of the community - and that’s Faruk. The newspapers call him too... if they need someone to communicate with, it’s him. For instance, if the police find the body of a Bangladeshi, they call him, and what does he do? He phones someone else and says, “Go and see who it is” [...]. The only association that actually does something for the Bangladeshi community is the “Venice Bangla School”... otherwise people would wonder why these associations were set up ... what they want to do, nothing... They’re only interested in saying, “I’m the president”, and that’s it. (Sakil, hotel employee in Venice, 2018).





for the second generation, and for girls and women, the only form of assistance offered by the *probashi* associations seems to be in the practice of Islamic charity, at the time of funerals for instance (Priori 2012a). In Venice too, the only genuinely active association that offers services for Bangladeshi immigrants mainly organizes Bengali language courses, helps children with schoolwork, and arranges sporting and recreational activities for the young. The leader of this association is also involved in the local Bangladeshi Islamic Association, and helps families to send the bodies of loved ones who die in Italy back to Bangladesh.

Where the associations set up by the *probashi* are particularly active is in preserving and promoting their home country's "culture", and this is another aspect that we cannot fully understand without looking carefully at their country of origin and its history.

By paying attention to the transnational dimension, and the link between the immigrants' two spheres of action (infra-political and politico-organizational), we noted how the Bangladeshi's transnational and national political networks sometimes have an impact on their local infra-political mobilization. In the case of Mestre, for instance, the rivalry between two leaders of the Awami League in Rome (chosen by the party's leaders in Bangladesh) prompted disputes between two groups of AL supporters faithful to one or other leader in the Venetian area as well. We also saw how these infra-political dynamics were echoed in the Bangladeshi's politico-organizational mobilization. In fact, the single-nationality Bangladesh Association (which is oriented towards the society of its members' adopted country) was established by one of the two rival political groups.

Analyzing the Bangladeshi's infra-political mobilization revealed the fracture lines and stratifications within this national group: some are significant for all migrants (gender, age, years spent in the adopted country, cultural capital); others are more specific to the Bangladeshi, such as an individual's position among the "vertical" bonds of patronage, political party affiliations, place of birth (a given district, but also town versus country). These factors do not take effect in unequivocal and deterministic ways, however. They are also associated with other factors more strongly connected to the conditions in which individual immigrants live in Italy, their status in Italian society, both in economic terms and as concerns their ability to establish fruitful relations with exponents of autochthonous institutions and organizations. As Gardner (2001, 2002) also said, it is therefore undeniably necessary to have an understanding of the prior social and cultural life radiating from the *shodesh*, but without allowing this to justify "an essentialism that ends up relegating the relationship with the society of the adopted country to the role of background noise with respect to the harmonic structure provided by the ancient unchangeable propensities of the *probashi*" (Priori 2012a, p. 322, our translation). In fact, as we demonstrated elsewhere (Mantovan 2007), the forms of self-organization that immigrants adopt are also strongly related to the setting (national and local) in which they develop. In the case of Italy, in particular, issues such as the fact that immigrants from outside the European Union are unable to vote, and a tendency to "ethnicize" immigrants' social and political participation have led to an excessive and misleading emphasis being placed on the supposedly representative role of single-nationality associations, and the over-hasty assumption that their leaders speak on behalf of their whole "community". Use of this latter construct stems from a substantial ignorance of the internal dynamics of national groups, due partly to an "orientalist" gaze that identifies them as indecipherable (Priori 2010). This effectively gives the presumed "representatives" of a community a considerable symbolic and material power. The fact that representatives of Italy's institutions often fail to see

immigrants as their peers, and do little to facilitate the latter's participation is certainly partly responsible for the weakness of most immigrants' associations in Italy, and helps to explain why they struggle to become a milieu for real democratic participation and the promotion of their members' rights.

The above considerations relate to the associations of first-generation *probashi*. The younger generations of Bangladeshi born in Italy, or who arrived in the country as young children, have very different needs. Hence the creation of a dedicated association (the Bangladesh Youth Association of Venice), which was active for some years. Many young Bangladeshis have a passion for bands that play Western-style rock music that their "oldies" absolutely detest. At "programs" they soon tire of the preliminary discussions (that they often fail to follow because of their poor command of Bengali), but cheer the dancers and singers. Some claim to "suffer" from the excessive social control exerted by their families and countrymen in general, and they call for greater freedom<sup>22</sup>. Others use their understanding (and reinterpretation) of their two Bangladeshi and Italian "cultures" to build professionalizing pathways, working as cultural mediators, immigration operators, traditional dance teachers (Carnà & Rossetti 2018). Some young people still see Bangladeshi politics as a significant resource for their identification and sense of belonging<sup>23</sup>. So how the "new generation" of Bangladeshi will process the traditions inherited from their parents remains largely to be seen.

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi who had moved with her husband to Mestre six months earlier, had arrived in Rome with her parents at the age of 13. She had chosen to marry a Bangladeshi she was in love with, not the man chosen for her by her father, a tradesman in Rome. She told me that her move to Mestre was partly motivated by the need to escape the oppression of her family.

<sup>23</sup> At the Bangladeshi New Year celebrations organized by the BA at the community center in Marghera in May 2004, for instance, there was a stall being managed by some young people selling food and drinks, but they also distributed little booklets about Mujibur Rahman, and leaflets about their own political group (one of many affiliated to the AL). They had a stereo broadcasting music (especially Bachcu, a Bangladeshi singer whose music clearly reflects Western influences, and is much appreciated by younger people), and danced behind the stall. At one point they also raised the volume to broadcast Mujibur Rahman's speech to the nation on the day of Bangladesh's independence. In short, people's preferred political party, like their favorite band, are strong means of identification and mobilization for some young Bangladeshi.



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