

Unintended asylum seekers: Bangladeshi probashi from Libya to Italy

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Bangladeshi migrants, who have recently reached Italy from Libya. It discusses the results of field-work conducted between 2017 and 2018 with Bangladeshi asylum seekers living in the Parma area who are, or have been, hosted in emergency reception centers called CAS (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria). The aim of this paper is to explore the characteristics of this recent migration flow and to examine how migrants navigate the country's formal reception system, adapting to and at the same time manipulating it. Migrants face a legal and political regime that is quite different from that of the 1990s and early 2000s. In order to secure refugee status, they find themselves caught up in a state-managed, complex reception system. Despite being in a weak and precarious position they move tactically in an unstable and uncertain environment to suit their life objectives.

Keywords: Bangladesh; migration; asylum seekers; Italy; social navigation

Introduction

In 2017, Bangladeshis were one of the top migrant groups leaving Libya along a route more traditionally used by sub-Saharan Africans, with more than 8,700 reaching Italy by sea between January and August 2017. In the first six months of 2017, 7,413 Bangladeshis applied for asylum in Italy, second only to Nigerians (ANCI et al., 2017: 82). The statistics from the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica also show that in Emilia Romagna, the region where Parma belongs, the number of resident Bangladeshi citizens increased from 7,964 in 2013 to 10,121 in 2019. Interestingly, the number of resident Bangladeshi has not changed much in the regional capital Bologna where the Bangladeshi community started growing in the early nineties. Instead the recent growth of resident Bangladeshis has occurred in small provincial towns where Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria (CASs) have been established². In Parma for example migrant Bangladeshis have increased from 76 in 2013 to 298 in 2019.

This paper explores the characteristics of the recent migration flow of Bangladeshi citizens from Libya to Italy and examines how migrants navigate the country's formal reception system, both adapting and manipulating it to suit their objectives. The concept of 'social navigation' frames my interpretation of the 'tactics' employed by Bangladeshi asylum seekers

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² The CASs were established by law in 2015 in order to respond to the emergency situation created by the massive arrival of migrants on the Italian coasts fleeing from Libya after the outbreak of the second civil war in May 2014. The CAS system is managed at the local level by the Prefettura, a provincial government body that is line managed by the Home Ministry. Although created as emergency centres where asylum seekers are hosted for a few months while their asylum applications are considered, the CASs have quickly become the main focus of the Italian reception system.



to survive in a 'shifting and volatile terrain' (Vigh, 2010: 154) while moving towards an imagined/desired future.

Research approach

The impetus of this study lies in my extensive research experience in Bangladesh, as well as my professional experience as a cultural and linguistic intermediary in a CAS located in Parma during 2017. In this role, I mainly accompanied Bangladeshi migrants to court hearings in Bologna, and participated in meetings with lawyers to analyze migrants' accounts and assess the strength of their legal case. I was also privileged to establish a good rapport with many asylum seekers outside of the formal asylum-seeking procedure. I was careful to make sure that these informal interactions took place outside the CAS office and that any information shared on these occasions remained strictly confidential and separate from the formal legal process. This paper is based on the migration stories of 29 Bangladeshi men: 10 qualitative interviews with Bangladeshi whom I also accompanied to Bologna for court hearings, and 19 scripts ('memoria') of their first formal interview with social workers of one of the centers in preparation for the Territorial Committee hearing. In some cases, I also examined the records of the hearings in Court and the Territorial Committee decisions. In 2018-2019 I also collaborated on a FAMI (Fondo Asilo Migrazione Integrazione) funded research project on the CAS system in Parma province, implemented by the local Prefettura in partnership with the University of Parma. During this project, I gained further insights into the functioning of the CAS system and I met other asylum seekers from different countries.

From Bangladesh to Lybia

Farhaz was 37 years old in 2017 when I first met him with the lawyer in preparation for his appeal hearing.³ The court granted him a 'humanitarian'⁴ visa for 2 years on account of his poor health condition, and during our informal meeting afterwards, he told me:

My story is a very sad one, I have had a very hard life. I studied up to grade 5, I was working as a mason from 1998 to 2009 in Saudi Arabia with my father-in-law but at some point, my own father became severely ill with diabetes and couldn't work anymore. There was nobody to help at home so I went back to my village. I had three uncles but none of them offered to help. I had to ask for loans and sell a small piece of land we had. You know, nobody cares for poor people. Rich people help only rich people and those who can give something, always want something in return. Now my wife's brother works in Saudi and one of my brothers is in Brunei. After I went home from Saudi, my father died and to survive I started rearing chickens but it was not profitable enough. I had to take loans and I was not able to repay them. So, in 2012 I decided I would go to Libya to work. I paid 200.000 taka (about 210 Euro) to a dalal (broker). I stayed in Libya for three years and I arrived in Italy in 2015.

³ If the Territorial Committee rejects the application the asylum seeker can appeal in Court.

⁴ Before the ratification of the so-called 'Decreto sicurezza' in December 2018, asylum seekers could be awarded, depending on their individual circumstances, three kinds of visa: a 2 year humanitarian visa for humanitarian reasons such severe illness, a 5 year 'subsidiary protection' if it could be demonstrated that returning to the country of origin puts the migrant at serious risk; a five years visa, corresponding to full refugee status. In December 2018 the humanitarian visa was abolished with the ratification by Parliament of the so-called 'Decreto Sicurezza'.



Farhaz like the other Bangladeshi whose stories I had the opportunity to hear in different occasions mentioned different aspects of his condition in Bangladesh and the reasons for leaving the country. His narrative shows the complex motivations that underpin any decision to leave Bangladesh – motivations that combine social, political and economic imperatives.

Mahinur arrived in Italy when he was under 18 and was granted a humanitarian visa. His story illustrates the socio-economic status of most of the migrant households:

When I was a child my mother died and I was left alone with my father. My brothers were working as daily labourers and could not help us. At some point my father, who was an electrician, got an electric shock and from that time onwards he couldn't work. I was in class 6 but I had to stop going to school because I had to do everything at home. Initially we were hosted by an uncle, but then we had to leave. We couldn't cope. I was not able to provide for the two of us. We didn't have any property except the little piece of land that our house was built on. I had no other choice but to leave and look for a job somewhere.

The majority of the asylum seekers I interviewed had very low levels of education. Only one had studied up to tertiary level and had to leave university because of the precarious condition of his family. Another one had reached Intermediate Level (i.e year 12) but did not get the Final Certificate (HSC, High Secondary Certificate). 12 migrants had studied between 1 and 5 years (2 of them in a koranic school), 12 had studied between 6 to 10 years but none had passed the Secondary School Certificate examination. Three migrants declared they had never attended school.

Another common feature of their narratives is the level of debt they experienced and the exploitative relationships with the *dalal* (agent or intermediary) who facilitated their migration (see Ricca, and Sbriccoli, 2015).

I met Adnan for the first time in the CAS where I was working. He asked for support from CAS staff because he was being bullied by other migrants living in the same flat. He is a young man who had obtained a humanitarian visa on the basis of a long story of indebtedness and usury. When he was little, his family started contracting debts with a local powerful family and kept doing it to marry off some of his sisters and to pay for medicines. Adnan was the only son and at some point, his parents decided to send him abroad so that he could earn a living and help his family. They could not count on the help of relatives so they had no choice but to take on more debts to pay for Adnan's trip. After Adnan arrived in Italy he started attending an Italian language course offered by the CAS that hosted him but he couldn't learn much because he had never gone to school before and was completely illiterate. On top of this, he had a severe sight problem. After some time in the CAS he started receiving phone calls from someone in Milano belonging to the same family that had lent money to him and his family back in Bangladesh. They were offering him work as a means of repaying his family's debts.

Most migrants' narratives suggest that those who lend money to prospective migrants or arrange documents or journeys, belong to a well-organized chain of dalals able to cover the whole trip from Bangladesh to Libya and in some cases to Italy as well. All the migrants reported that their documents had been confiscated at arrival in Libya by someone who 'welcomed' them, in many cases a Bangladeshi, and that the same person took them to their eventual place of work. In some cases, before being given a job they were tortured and forced

to call home and ask for more money. Those who had been in Libya for a few months only were handed over by the first *dalal* to someone else responsible for the onward journey to Italy. Although some research identifies those who facilitated the migration as *adam beparis*, i.e. part of a network of relatives, neighbours and acquaintances linked to early migrants (Knights and King, 1998; Del Franco, 2010), the role of *dalals* has never been completely positive and some studies underlie the exploitative nature of these arrangements (Priori, 2012; Quattrocchi, 2003). In most of the narratives I listened to, the traffickers were more exploitative than 'friendly' (see also Monzini, 2007; Rahman and Kabir, 2012).

In May 2020 a number of Bangladeshi newspapers published articles on the death of 26 Bangladeshi citizens in Libya. According to reports, a group of international traffickers, comprising Libyans, Bangladeshis and Somalians had demanded 10 *lakh* taka (approximately 10,000 Euro) from each of the migrants' families before killing them. Investigators in Bangladesh found nine organized syndicates of transnational traffickers based in nine districts who used the United Arab Emirates as a major transit point to send Bangladeshi job-seekers to Libya via Amman. The migrants were then sent to Europe by boat via Malta.⁵ The newspapers also reported that the migrants paid around 4 *lakh* taka (approximately 4,000 Euro) to the *dalals* to reach Libya and an additional amount from Libya to Europe. These reports are consistent with the accounts of asylum seekers I interviewed. Of the 29 migrants I interviewed, those who had left Bangladesh relatively recently paid about 4 to 5 *lakh* taka (4,000 to 5,000 euro) up to Libya while those who migrated earlier paid between 2 and 3 *lakh* taka (2,000 to 3,000 euro).

All 29 migrants claimed that from the start of their journeys, Libya was their intended final destination. All of them stated that when they left Bangladesh they had been told that they would have a job in Libya that would help them support their households back home. They claimed that they decided to move to Italy only when they realized the poor law and order situation in Libya and after having suffered different forms of violence. However, my data on the duration of their stay in Libya shows a slightly more mixed picture. Most of those who arrived in Italy in 2016-2017 had spent only a few months in Libya while four migrants had spent around one year. Those who arrived in 2015 had previously been in Libya between 2 and 4 years, and only one had been there 6 years. In only 17 of the 29 cases, the duration of stay in Libya seems to be consistent with what the migrants say about their intended destination⁶.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast literature on Bangladeshi migration. However, it is worth noting that Bangladeshis have a long story of migration to both national, international and overseas destinations. Migration to Middle Eastern countries is entangled with migration to Europe. Della Puppa (2014), Priori (2012), Morad and Gombac, (2014), show that until the 2000s, many Bangladeshi men came to Italy from West European countries as well as from Eastern Europe, Middle East and Libya. My own previous research shows that Bangladeshi men migrated to the Middle East before joining their siblings in

⁵ <http://epaper.thedailystar.net/Home/ShareArticle?OrgId=402c051c&imageview=1>

⁶ These data also resonate with a study by IOM which reports that almost half of all adults reported to have re-started their journey towards Europe after having spent one year or more in a country different from Bangladesh. The share is lower but still significant, among children (27 per cent in 2016 and 34 per cent in 2017). Moreover 98% of the interviewees had been in Libya more than one year before moving to Italy (IOM 2017, p.6). Most of those interviewed in 2016 by IOM reported Italy as the intended destination at the time of departure while in 2017 only 41/% had Italy as the intended destination.



Europe, sometimes using funds acquired during their stay in the Middle East (Del Franco, 2010).

What is clear from the accounts I have gathered is that migration to Italy is not a straightforward, or linear process. Indeed, if we consider motivations as well as intended final destinations, it is clear that no two migrant accounts are identical. The literature shows that what migrants experience during the journey might change their aspirations and thus their destinations (Collyer and de Haas, 2012). It is thus more appropriate to describe this kind of migration in terms of ‘fragmented’ migrations (Collyer, 2007, 2010) if we want to capture the diversity of experiences and the complexity of both motivations and conditions of migration. As Collyer and de Haas argue

the only logic that emerges is one of continual or regular dissatisfaction with the working or living conditions encountered or the regular deterioration in individual security. The only real pattern is one of fragmentation as individuals continually strive to improve themselves and their situation, to find better than they have now (Collyer and de Haas 2012: 478).

The first studies on the Bangladeshi community in Italy defined them as ‘well educated risk-takers’ (Knights, 1996: 141-143) belonging to an emerging middle-class with high standards and aspirations, and not interested in less prestigious and less remunerative older destinations like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia (Zeitlyn, 2006: 30-31). Even though recent literature has problematized this image by showing that migrants who migrate to Europe come from diverse backgrounds (see Priori, 2012), the profile of the majority of the migrants I interviewed is consistent with the socio-economic characteristics of those who have been migrating since the seventies to countries such as Malaysia, the Gulf and Libya (Siddiqui, 2004,2005). Even if their motivations and personal narratives are significantly diverse, the majority of migrants I interviewed had similar socio-economic profiles and low levels of education. Most did not have acquaintances in Italy or other European countries. In short, they were similar to unskilled job seekers who migrate through stages relying on short term contracts. They also pay much less than migrants who move directly to Europe (Del Franco, 2010).

Navigating the system

An important element that characterises the situation of the group of migrants I consider is the legal context at destination. Today’s migrants, unlike those who reached Italy up to the late 2000s, have to become ‘asylum seekers’ in order to be legally recognised since this status is the only one ‘available’ after the abolition by law of the sponsorship system in 2002 and the malfunctioning since the early 2010s of the quota system. Moreover, as they come from Libya by boats that are intercepted either by NGO ships or the Italian Coastal Guard, they become the responsibility of the Italian authorities.

Following their identification, migrants are assigned to a CAS where they start the process of applying for asylum after obtaining a six-month temporary visa.⁷ During meetings with the

⁷ After landing in Italy, migrants are identified and then sent to a regional hub (Bologna in our case) where they fill in a form called C3. This contains information about bio data and reasons for leaving their country. Each migrant’s case is first examined, with the applicant present, by a Territorial Committee. The answer to the question about the reasons why the applicant left his

lawyer in preparation for the court hearing, the vast majority of migrants claimed that the reason for seeking asylum was political: either they had been abused or threatened by political activists (mostly from the ruling party) or were close family members of someone who had been threatened. In my in-depth interviews and conversations however, I noticed that political reasons often disappeared from their accounts and were replaced by socio-economic ones.

Only 3 out of the 29 migrants were able to provide evidence of political persecution in Bangladesh. Of these, only one obtained 5 years 'subsidiary' protection (see footnote 5). The few whose applications had a positive result were given a two-year humanitarian visa on the grounds of severe ill health (see Farhaz's case), being a minor at the time of arrival, or because they were victims of threats or violence.

This is an abstract of Selim's written record of the Territorial Committee meeting:

In 2008 there was an Awami League meeting in front of my shop. Suddenly a bomb exploded and we all ran away. When I went back to the place, I saw some young people there and I realized that my shop had been damaged. I thought that they were responsible for the bomb and I complained about the damage to my shop. One of them punched me and I lost 5 teeth. The next day I went to the police office to file a case but the officer in charge suggested that I give up because I would end up in more trouble. The day after, the same young people came to my house and beat up all my family members. So, my mother suggested that I go to Dhaka. I was there for 40-45 days and then I left for Libya where I stayed for 6 years. While I was in Libya I heard that my wife had been kidnapped by an Awami League supporter.

Selim was unable to give more details to the Committee about the facts he described and when asked what he thought would happen if he went back to Bangladesh, claimed: *'If I went back they would kill me. I lost my wife. I have three brothers but they live on their own, and don't care about me because I have never been able to send money home. I lost my father at 16 and then my house'*.

The Territorial Committee denied Selim a visa because they found a contradiction in his account: *'first he said that his wife went away with another man and then he asked to change his statement and said that his wife had been kidnapped by a member of the Awami League party. For this reason, his story is not credible'* (Territorial Committee of Bologna 2015).

From what Selim privately told me, it seems that his wife had left him to run away with another man and had not been kidnapped by an Awami League member. To attribute his problems to the Awami League was his attempt to convince the Committee that he and his family were persecuted for political reasons.

It is clear that when they arrive, asylum seekers are given advise on the information needed in order to obtain the right to remain in Italy. However, the advise often comes from many sources, and is rarely well informed and consistent. As a result, migrants do not have a clear idea about the asylum process, the different entitlements attached to different visas, and the

country is decisive to whether the migrant is awarded or denied a visa. If the account does not contain enough evidence of victimisation or political persecution, the Committee rejects the application. The migrant can appeal in Court where, accompanied by his lawyer and an interpreter, he would be asked again to tell his migration account to a judge. Until the summer of 2017, asylum seekers whose applications were rejected for the second time could appeal to another Court, and in case of a negative response, to the Supreme Court in Rome (Corte di Cassazione). In 2017 the second appeal was abolished.



implications of a rejected claim. At the same time, not having a precise understanding of the asylum process means that migrants feel powerless in the face of a bureaucratic system where they are in a subordinate position. A recurrent phrase in their narratives about their present situation reveals the sense of hopelessness and despair: ‘... *I don’t know what I can do*’. For this reason, they understand the need to invent stories that will appeal to their institutional interlocutors. In short they have to cheat the system, a tactic discussed by Kibread (2004) in relation to refugees hosted in UNHCR and NGOs managed camps, who employ ‘*cheating and misrepresentation of facts [...] in order to maximize their benefits*’ (Kibread, 2004:2).

Navigating the system

Thus, we can say that migrants do their best to identify with and ‘qualify for’ the legal category of ‘refugee’ since this is the only identity that entitles them to rights, starting with the right to remain in Italy. In the process however they have to ‘reconstruct’ identities and experiences (Sbriccoli and Perugini, 2012), while at the same time pursuing their own objectives. On arrival in Italy much is therefore discounted including the complexity of the migrants’ social background; their individual histories, needs and aspirations; the resources and agency invested when leaving Bangladesh; the violence and abuse experienced in Libya; the risks confronted in crossing the Mediterranean. What counts are the ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’ which can help them legally transform themselves from ‘migrant’ into an ‘asylum seeker’ (Malkki, 1996; Manocchi, 2014). Their complex stories become ‘cases’, ‘*institutionalized over time through labels*’ (Wood, 1995: 355), in order to acquire the right to remain in Italy. The bureaucratic rules set by the state determine the principles of inclusion, exclusion, and eligibility (Wood, 1995)⁸.

When the CAS system was instituted by law, migrants were supposed to live in the centres for a few months until their legal situation had been settled. The reality though is very different. From the data recorded by the Prefettura di Parma, it appears that those hosted by CASs in 2017 had been staying there for about three years on average. Although the asylum seekers are provided⁹ with a number of services¹⁰ in the centres, their mobility is limited. They are subjected to strict controls on the use of their time, and sanctioned if they don’t comply with the internal regulations. They are not allowed to leave the CAS buildings at night, which restricts the possibility of staying in touch with fellow countrymen residing in different towns and of establishing the networks that are so necessary for future employment opportunities. According to Soleiman:

I have a place to eat and sleep but my life is not going forward... I cannot send money to my family in Bangladesh, I have come here because in Libya I was afraid for my life but if I don’t find a job, a way to earn money, I will be in even more trouble. Italy

⁸ Wood (1995:352) describes ‘labelling’ as part of the bureaucratic, compartmentalized management of services, ‘a relationship of power, asymmetrical and one-sided’.

⁹ From December 2018, in line with the so-called ‘Decreto Sicurezza’, the amount of money assigned to CASs to provide services to the migrants decreased from a maximum of 35 euros per day to a maximum of 21-26 depending on the size of the CAS. This has had a significant impact on the quality and quantity of the services. Services include legal assistance, basic and secondary services such as food and accommodation, health assistance, Italian language courses, and where possible, training in income generating activities and work internships.

is good place to live and I am alright here but I cannot think only about myself. I have people in Bangladesh I have to take care of.

More importantly in most cases, and notwithstanding the good will of the social workers who deal with them, asylum seekers are treated either as victims in need of help or as cheaters who don't deserve to be helped (Manocchi, 2014). In short, the system assumes that migrants will adhere to a predetermined project inside which there is little space for autonomous decisions (Bakewell, 2010).

Given that there are only a few cases where some sort of protection is awarded immediately after the Territorial Committee hearing, Bangladeshi migrants spend up to three years in the CASs only then for their applications to be rejected. Those with low levels of education, who have been in Libya for years and are more vulnerable in economic terms (because of the debt contracted before migration) are even more adversely affected by a system which keeps people in a dependent position for long time without any certainty for the future.

I concur with Pinelli (2015) who argued that the CASs represent a 'confined space characterized by the suspension of rights, designed to control and contain the asylum seekers', a place where the migrants can be controlled and assisted, but where their social and political subjectivity are not recognized (Pinelli, 2015: 12). The sense of being stuck in what is perceived as a never-ending situation of dependency is well expressed by Mohammad:

When I arrived in this CAS, I was happy. I felt secure after going through very difficult situations in Libya. I hoped that here people would help me. People here are good and they really try to help but there is not much they can do for me if I don't get the documents. I have lost my enthusiasm. Nothing happens. The days are all the same. Except studying Italian there is not much to do. Some days I just eat and sleep.

Mohammad expresses well feelings that many asylum seekers share: the more protracted their stay in the centres, the more they become frustrated and helpless.

They cannot go back to their countries and they cannot pursue a living in Italy. The CASs might offer them the possibility of a reasonable existence but it is completely detached from those they feel responsible for.

Manocchi considers the limited room for manoeuvre asylum seekers have and asks to what extent their strategies can be understood as 'informed resistance' or an expression of a 'struggle to survive' (Manocchi, 2014:400). I suggest that the concept of social navigation developed by Vigh (2010) may constitute an alternative response to Manocchi's propositions. As Vigh (2010) argues

"with the concept of social navigation we become aware that we are all simultaneously moving expediently along a course as well as being moved involuntarily by the course of events. The simultaneity of being afloat, adrift and in control defines a social being as we seek to navigate our lives through social environments that have been set in motion by myriad individual and collective acts and forces beyond our control" (Vigh, 2010:159).

Migrants navigate an unstable and uncertain terrain by acting and reacting in relation to their constrained position and their perception of a possible future. So, for example the migrants are well aware that if they find a regular job with a salary higher than a certain amount, they



will lose the right to free accommodation and free legal assistance. As a result, they prefer to cheat the system by engaging in irregular and informal jobs without communicating it to the centre management and hiding the money they earn. In order to do this, they skip the compulsory Italian language courses since these do not address any of their immediate needs. Soleiman while hosted in the CAS, had been working as a cook without a contract for a well-settled Bangladeshi family. After he was refused the visa (a process that lasted almost 4 years), he moved to the South of Italy where he is now working in agriculture without a contract. At the same time, he is paying a lawyer to start the whole process of applying for asylum from scratch so that as long as the process lasts, he can renew his six-month temporary permit.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to discuss some of the characteristics of the recent migration flow of Bangladeshi citizens arriving in Italy from Libya since 2015, and some aspects of their conditions in Italy while hosted in emergency reception centres.

I have argued that their socioeconomic profiles are more in line with those who migrate from Bangladesh for short terms contracts to destinations such as Malaysia and the Gulf Countries. I have also argued that most relied on a chain of unknown brokers who charge for their services. These services are met by migrants taking on more debt.

I also considered the legal, social and political context migrants find themselves in once they land in Italy. The Bangladeshi who have recently moved from Libya to Italy face a legal and political regime that is quite different from that of the 1990s and early 2000s. In order to secure refugee status, migrants find themselves caught up in a state-managed, complex reception system that is constructed to identify and discriminate between those who ‘deserve’ to stay in Italy and those who do not. The criteria used to achieve this rests on a distinction between economic migrants and those who are ‘genuine’ victims of war or political persecution.

Bangladeshi migrants do what they can to discard the label of ‘undeserving economic migrant’ embracing instead that of ‘refugee’ by creating a proper migration narrative. By repeatedly applying for asylum status, they earn time to pursue their objectives: earn an income and support their households back home, and ultimately a future status that grants them leave to remain in Italy.

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