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Homemaking as a multilocal process Right to space, urbanisation and cosmopolitanism of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome

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Introduction

The present research aims at investigating the processes through which migrant groups produce space, negotiate belonging, and articulate claims to visibility and rights in urban contexts that lack a consolidated tradition of migration and diversity governance. The choice to focus on the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome, and specifically on its dense concentration in the neighbourhood of Torpignattara, responds to the need to investigate a case that, while exceptional within the Italian national context, can illuminate broader dynamics at the convergence of marginality, transnational diasporic imaginaries and the everyday negotiation of difference.

Rome represents a particularly ambiguous but relevant terrain for the study of migration and urban diversity. As a capital city of a country without a colonial legacy directly tied to South Asian migration, and as a relatively late receiver of sustained immigration flows, where being recognised as an integral part of society strongly depends on an ethno-symbolic definition based on excluding criteria of homogeneity, its capacity to manage pluralism has developed in fragmented, often improvised ways. The Italian model of migration governance has in fact oscillated between sporadic interventions and waves of securitarian attitudes, often lacking a coherent and stable policy framework. This structural incompleteness offers a fertile ground to observe how migrant groups articulate alternative forms of urban citizenship, visibility and collective agency.

The case of Torpignattara stands out as a privileged observatory for these dynamics. The neighbourhood has assumed, over the last two decades, the role of prominent centre of aggregation for the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome, which itself hosts the second largest group of Bangladeshi nationals in Europe. Besides such a demographic significance, Torpignattara has taken on the role of a crossroads of social, commercial, religious and associative networks through which the Bangladeshi diaspora has become visible and recognisable, thanks to a genuine agency that has allowed for a substantial appropriation of the local space, within a continuous negotiation with the discursive regimes and the collective imaginaries of its receiving society. Its relevance derives from a combination of symbolic, social and infrastructural factors that make it a unique context for residents of Bangladeshi nationality or background in Rome, acting as a centre of attraction and an essential point of reference for many other immigrant groups. Quite often, even those who live elsewhere and show no particular interest or affection for Torpignattara

are somehow compelled to make use of it, to participate in religious celebrations, weddings, political debates or other community activities as it possesses infrastructures crucial to foreign cultural life that are unavailable in other areas of the city. Moreover, the neighbourhood is the regular destination of an endless parade of researchers, journalists and video makers, often international, each with their own approach and vision, but all united by the centripetal force that the neighbourhood, with its notoriety and at times fetishised exoticism, exerts for better or for worse, and which apparently never loses its appeal. In this sense, Torpignattara represents a paradigmatic case for testing the conventional analytical categories commonly used in the study of densely migratory settlements: concepts such as “ghetto”, “ethnic enclave” or “segregated community” only partially capture the multilayered and ambivalent processes that configure this urban space. Although these categories can highlight some important aspects of the risk that the spatial concentration of legal, socio-economic, or ethno-cultural precariousness may hinder a valuable intermixing which should supposedly lead to forms of integration to emerge from a state of marginality, they often fail to take into account the modes of agency, negotiation, and symbolic production through which migrant groups actively reconfigure the urban context they inhabit. The everyday life of Torpignattara, whose highly heterogeneous social fabric, composite moral economies and transnational flows of people and imageries, requires an analytical approach capable of grasping the complexity of urban difference beyond rigid taxonomies. The very notion of integration, as elaborated by critical scholars such as Schinkel (2017), often functions less as a descriptive analytic tool than as a normative dispositif, through which societies reproduce boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Integration, in this sense, operates performatively, continually reinscribing the migrant subject as alternatively the object of state intervention, moral correction or cultural accommodation. This dynamic is particularly acute in Southern European contexts, where the absence of established multicultural frameworks often amplifies the ambivalence and contingency of migrant incorporation.

The Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome provides a particularly rich empirical case through which to interrogate these tensions. As Sayad (1999) argued in his seminal theorisation of the ‘double absence,’ migrants often find themselves excluded both from full participation in the host society and from the political and economic life of their country of origin. Yet, in the case of the Bangladeshi diaspora, this absence is partially mitigated by the

formation of dense transnational networks, which sustain not only material flows of remittances but also symbolic economies of recognition, status and collective identification. The notion of multipresence – advanced and articulated in the second chapter – tries to capture this dynamic, whereby individuals and families are simultaneously embedded in multiple socio-spatial fields, negotiating their identities and strategies across national borders, urban contexts and generational lines.

Such a transnational positionality directly informs the spatial practices and aspirations observable in contexts such as Torpignattara. The visibility of London, and specifically the consolidation of Tower Hamlets as a globally recognized South Asian diasporic space, functions as both a symbolic horizon and a practical reference for many members of the Bangladeshi community in Rome. As evidenced throughout the fieldwork, the image of London operates simultaneously as a mirror that reflects the structural limits of the Italian model and as an aspirational template through which alternative modes of belonging are imagined, projected and partially enacted.

These multilocal trajectories further complicate the analytical frame, requiring an approach that transcends the national container and attends to the relational geographies that migrants actively construct. In this context, undertaking ethnographic research in London emerged as essential, in light of the recurrent mentions in the interviews and stories collected in Rome where the British capital strongly emerged as a reference point, both in the construction of the diasporic imaginary and in the concrete self-projection of many participants who were born or raised in Italy. The previously established trajectory of conationals, closely following the paths of multilocal family networks and migratory routes that led many – especially second generations – away from Rome in an attempt to find a context perceived as less exclusionary, where hostility towards somatic and religious visibility is perceived to be less pronounced, and where a pluralistic approach to national identity is more common. The intention, therefore, was to investigate the way in which the historical experience of Bangladeshis in England – and the concrete spatial and symbolic configuration of Brick Lane – has produced a shared repertoire of practices and models which, although originating in a different context, are evoked, adapted and reinterpreted in Rome. Consequently, the interest in what is happening in London served, on the one hand, to highlight the tangible impact of cross-national connections on the daily life of the Roman diaspora, and on the other hand, to show how the experience of a more visible and consolidated diasporic presence in London

has offered a model, a range of possibilities to those who, in a context less accustomed to difference, are nonetheless trying to create a familiar, protective and partly legitimised space. The image of London thus acts as a critical mirror, reflecting both the shortcomings of the Italian context and the symbolic resources available to the diaspora to imagine other ways of living, participating and imagining the future, and allows to grasp the multilocal nature of belonging, the ability of migrants to mobilise multiple references and to make sense of a geography that is not limited to the origin-destination dichotomy.

The urban space of Torpignattara, in this light, is not only a site of settlement but a platform through which these complex positionalities are staged, contested and negotiated. The dense associational networks, the proliferation of halal businesses, the visible presence of places of worship, the organisation of political campaigns and the celebration of religious and national holidays all contribute to the production of a public diasporic space where belonging is continuously rehearsed and made visible. Yet, these processes still unfold within an urban and political context that remains marked by profound ambivalences: the selective embrace of diversity for consumption and spectacle coexists with securitarian discourses of urban decay, moral panic and disciplinary practices. In this sense, Torpignattara functions as both a laboratory and a battleground for the negotiation of urban citizenship in contemporary Southern Europe. The urban struggles that take shape here are emblematic of broader tensions between top-down urban governance, informal self-organisation, and the competing logics of commodification, control, and autonomy that traverse migrant urbanisms globally. Far from representing a passive recipient of state integration policies, the Bangladeshi diaspora emerges here as an active subject, articulating claims to space, recognition, and citizenship that challenge both the limits of the nation-state and the epistemic frameworks through which migration is often apprehended.

The coexistence of profoundly heterogeneous social realities – often held together not by a pre-established harmony but by a dense negotiation of the possible – makes Torpignattara an emblematic microcosm, and at the same time a critical threshold from which to question the parameters of inclusion and recognition. The importance of these experiences, however isolated, lies in the fact that they represent signs of a possible paradigm shift. Whilst until a few years ago it would probably be considered ambitious to think of a strategic municipal planning initiative in Rome, today the material

and political conditions for a change are beginning to manifest, and we can't exclude the possibility that this will also affect the city's relationship with difference.

In this scenario, neighbourhoods such as Torpignattara, characterised by a significant migrant population and growing media and political visibility, could soon fall within the orbit of institutional and private interests eager to transform its image, function and market value. All this is compounded by the fact that the national and local political framework is in a phase of transition. The recent general election, which signalled a change of direction at a national level with the victory of conservative and nationalist forces, is part of a wider climate which is ideologically closed to forms of urban pluralism. At a municipal level, although the city is today led by a theoretically more progressive administration, it cannot be excluded that a future change of political leadership could determine a more favourable orientation towards security interventions, strategies to contain the migrant presence, or forms of economic exploitation of diversity through processes of gentrification and ethnic branding. The same public discourse that in recent months has insisted on the 'Caivano model', now applied to a neighbourhood not too far from Torpignattara, called Quarticciolo, on the need to restore legality, decorum and control in areas considered marginal or deviant, could easily be applied to neighbourhoods such as Torpignattara. The rhetoric of security, of the fight against degradation, of the 'normalisation' of public space – mobilised in the past to justify the closure of informal places of worship and the repression of spontaneous gatherings – risks being reactivated in a context where the migrant presence is still perceived as an exception, as an anomaly to be managed rather than as an integral part of the urban fabric. In this sense, the current moment should be seen as a critical threshold: on the one hand there is the possibility that Torpignattara will continue to be a space for the autonomous development of a sense of citizenship, belonging and coexistence; on the other hand, it runs the risk of being reshaped from above, transformed into a laboratory for extractive, aestheticising and disciplinary policies. Such a scenario therefore urgently requires in-depth, up-to-date ethnographic documentation, capable of restoring the stratification of meanings that are condensed in this space, before urban and political transformations redefine it irreversibly. Only through a careful analysis of these dynamics will it be possible to understand the forces at play, the resistance that is being activated, and the possible future trajectories for a city that, albeit reluctantly, is increasingly confronted

with the need to come to terms with the plurality of its social components. In this context, the case of Torpignattara offers itself as a privileged observatory for questioning the conditions of production of urban citizenship, the tensions between planning and appropriation, between visibility and control, between transformation and resistance.

In order to capture the full complexity of these dynamics, this thesis adopts a methodological approach grounded in long-term ethnographic fieldwork, multisited research design, and a reflexive engagement with the positionality of the researcher. By embedding the investigation within the everyday lives of Bangladeshi migrants in Rome and London, the research aims to foreground the voices, practices, and aspirations of the subjects themselves, while situating these within the broader political, economic, and discursive structures that condition their possibilities for action.

A brief note on the use of the term “community”

Throughout this dissertation, I have made extensive and deliberate use of the term "community" to refer to the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome and London. I am fully aware that this notion remains highly debated and deeply contested, especially when applied to migrant populations, for its tendency to reify social groups into bounded, homogeneous, and static cultural units, conveying an oversimplified representation of complex, stratified social realities. A wide body of literature, particularly within Anglo-Saxon scholarship, has challenged this essentialist reduction by foregrounding the internal heterogeneity of migrant groups and emphasizing the intersecting axes of class, gender, legal status, generation, and regional origin that differentiate actors within any so-called ethnic or national group (among others, Glick Schiller et al. 2006; Batnitzky et al. 2008; Rodriguez 2006; Werbner 2010).

The Bangladeshi population in Rome, as examined in detail, for example, by Priori (2013), is traversed by profound internal divisions along these same lines of class, occupational sector, gender, seniority of migration, political orientation, age, legal status, and regional provenance. But at the same time, as Priori himself also notes, despite these internal complexities, the Bangladeshi diaspora has distinguished itself in Rome precisely because of its tendency towards a strong social cohesion, for apparent it may be interpreted, through grassroots self-organization, public visibility and active participation in associative and institutional spaces that make it one of the

most publicly recognizable migrant collectivities within the city's urban fabric.

My decision to employ the term "community" throughout this work has been in fact conscious and intentional, grounded in the attention to the categories and self-representations employed by the actors themselves. Rather than projecting an etic categorization imposed externally – whether out of epistemological naivety or convenience – I have instead sought to engage with the term as it is used emically by my interlocutors themselves. During years of fieldwork, both in Rome and London, it became consistently evident that my Bangladeshi interlocutors, who are certainly more keenly aware than any external observer of the internal divisions and conflicts that characterize their own social worlds, nonetheless routinely referred to themselves, and to other Bangladeshis, as members of a “community”, as *paesani* (compatriots), participants in a shared collective existence that they themselves recognize, mobilize and narrate as such.

In this sense, my use of "community" follows a principle articulated by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who, citing Maurice Hocart, argued that social sciences would not make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if they persisted in dividing what the people join and in joining what they keep apart. Rejecting my interlocutors' own language would have constituted a form of analytical violence, imposing a theoretical abstraction that fails to take seriously the lived categories of belonging that migrants mobilize in their everyday lives. My approach has therefore been guided by a methodological decision to respect and analytically engage with the emic categories through which actors organize their social experiences, while simultaneously interrogating the internal differentiations, tensions, and ambivalences that inhabit these very same categories. If any sociological reduction to bounded and cohesive groups risks essentialising the concept of community, to ignore or discredit its emic use from the outside, necessarily imposing a fragmentation of self-perceived identities, would precisely reintroduce the essentialist misrepresentations that critical migration studies have sought to dismantle.

In this endeavour, I have drawn particular inspiration from the theoretical framework developed by Modood (2017), who challenges the radical scepticism of authors such as Brubaker (2004) to the essentializing tendencies of culturalist approaches that treat ethnic groups as fixed and internally homogeneous. For Modood, groups exist not because they correspond to stable ontological categories, but because they are lived,

enacted, and mobilized by individuals who experience collective belonging as meaningful, affective, and historically situated. Collective identities, from this perspective, are constituted through the ongoing interaction of external ascriptions, internal self-definitions, shared practices, symbolic resources, and strategic responses to the challenges and opportunities posed by broader social structures.

This theoretical orientation has enabled me to approach the Bangladeshi presence in Rome not as a monolithic entity but as a field of social practice in which collective belonging is both invoked and negotiated. While deeply fragmented along multiple lines of division, the Bangladeshi population in Rome nonetheless continuously mobilizes a shared communal language in public discourse, associational life, and everyday interactions.

Thus, the term "community," as employed in this dissertation, should not be understood as denoting empirical uniformity or cultural homogeneity, but rather as reflecting a collective identity that is socially produced, narratively enacted, and reflexively lived by those who claim it. My use of the term is therefore situated, self-conscious, and attuned to the tensions, contradictions, and diversities that traverse any lived collectivity, while simultaneously taking seriously the emic constructions of belonging through which my interlocutors continually remake and narrate their shared social world.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

1.1 City and difference. Migrant strategies, local policies and social tensions

The city has always been emblematic crossroads for the coexistence and interaction of heterogeneous groups, migratory flows, contradictory processes of development and multilayered identity formations. However, the intensification of migration to cities is undoubtedly one of the most complex and significant social phenomena in contemporary national history, since it constantly reshapes their physical, social and symbolic aspects, and strongly intervenes in their internal structures, remodelling pre-existing hierarchies and continuously redefining collective imagination. In an increasingly mobile world, international migration emerges as a significant factor of urban reorganisation and change, offering opportunities for (re)invention for its residents, both new and old, and, at the same time, challenges for all those involved in managing these dynamics (Triandafyllidou et al., 2024). This means that ‘encounter’ and ‘friction’ cannot be considered as sporadic or exceptional events, but should instead be interpreted as structural dynamics of urban life, an integral part of the complex social fabric in which processes of assimilation, segregation, hybridisation and resistance constantly coexist in the same space.

In this regard, some of the earliest research on the diaspora (Brah, 2005; Gilroy, 1994) already highlighted how migrants were not simply ‘guests’ to be integrated, but individuals and groups who brought along their own collective demands, as well as global cosmopolitan influences, transnational projects and strategies, and creative practices of adaptation to the urban contexts in which they settled. In this perspective, diasporic experiences have been interpreted as dynamic dimensions, as places of a home through motion, that is, of a symbolic home in continuous movement and transformation (Levitt, 2009). Although these dynamics have often been studied in general terms, in search of almost universal constant features, each individual urban context, with its historical and social particularities, is a potentially unique case of intersection of history, localised reality, identity, interests and different interventions, both at an inter- and intra-national level. Since it is at the local level that economic ambitions, political aspirations and the daily practices of coexistence merge and are reshaped, it is in specific contexts that we must look in order to understand general macro-phenomena. Despite the fact that, for example, the regulation of integration is a matter

primarily for central governments, it is in cities that the presence of newcomers and minority groups takes tangible form and policies are applied, demonstrating the crucial role of urban governance in redefining national identity and the difficult balance between local dimensions and transnational projections (Çaglar & Glick Schiller, 2018). The local dimension, with the urban space as its privileged setting, represents the place where an abstract concept such as the 'nation' becomes a tangible reality, which translates into unpredictable synergies or apparently unsolvable conflicts, and where its instances, contradictions and generalisations are called into question.

Nevertheless, despite the possibilities for innovation and cultural dynamism that diversity implies, the potential for heterogeneous groups to achieve positive urban coexistence seems increasingly under threat. The worsening of economic inequalities, often intertwining and overlapping ethnicity to class, undermines social cohesion and can therefore lead to a general negative perception among majority groups towards newcomers, complicating for some of them full acceptance, which can translate in a lower degree of access to some sectors of the labour market, the full fruition of basic services, public spaces, mobility infrastructures and so on, and, in return, can influence the sense of belonging and attachment to place of new arrivals, especially for second generations. In addition, the growing popularity of anti-immigrant political rhetoric tends to further promote the feeling of 'foreignness' among migrants within the territory they inhabit. The city's material infrastructural background is crossed by a junction of global trends, financial interests, cohabitation challenges and nationwide rhetoric that intersect and conflict with each other. As a result, its fabric, shaped by proximity and distance, everyday practices and institutional arrangements, is the backdrop against which the 'problem' of migration takes shape: here, the conditions for inclusion or marginalisation translate into tangible outcomes, and the ways in which grassroots forms of counter-power and innovation come into being. Migrants and their offspring concurrently engage in identity-making that defies a clear-cut dichotomy between assimilation and fierce ethnicity, giving way rather to a mosaic of constraints and opportunities, locally and transnationally interwoven.

For this reason, the urban environment is never, socially or spatially, a simple neutral framework, but a relational field (Massey, 1994) within which the coexistence of different groups is mediated by institutions, regulations, informal economies and control mechanisms. Henri Lefebvre (2014) was the pioneer of the idea that the production of urban space is not just an aseptic

material fact, but a process of social co-construction in which different perspectives emerge and therefore power structures and potential mechanisms of exclusion. From this point of view, the contemporary city is first and foremost a place where the dialectic between mobility and belonging, boundaries established and crossed, visibility and anonymity is played out. Far from being a predetermined, passive container, urban space is therefore the product of interaction and a combination of transnational economies, diversity management policies and the daily practices that migrants themselves develop to negotiate their place in the urban fabric, within the range of possibilities offered by the particular context. This can fuel divisions that are evident in both public discourse and everyday cityscapes: concentrations of wealth and enclaves of marginalisation often coexist in close proximity, exemplifying the fragmentation of the urban fabric and the difficulty of coalescing shared identities.

Urban capitalism, as emphasised by David Harvey (1989), gave rise to dynamics of appropriation and dispossession, favouring the concentration of capital in different sectors, from housing to finance, often to the detriment of the most vulnerable segments of the population. Global cities (Sassen, 2001), in their attraction of economic and human capital, represent epicentres of economic as well as social segmentation and rising labor precariousness, often concentrated in the most informal and least protected sectors, exactly those in which the presence of migrants has often played a crucial role.

Likewise, a similar polarisation and dissonance can be seen in the urban areas where those perceived as newcomers settle. In many cities experiencing international migration, spaces that have long been semi-abandoned, underused or neglected by majority groups, for a variety of contextual reasons ranging from low property value or lack of economic attractiveness, to changes in the symbolic or infrastructural layout of the city, are often suddenly brought back to the centre of public debate and governance strategies once they become the place of settlement and emergence of new practices by migrant groups. Their visibility, especially when taking the form of collective aggregation and reappropriation, quickly becomes hyper-visibility (see for example Brighenti, 2010; Cancellieri & Ostanel, 2015), catalysing tensions and rhetorics that interpret these phenomena not as part of a natural cycle of reuse of urban space, but as a problem of loss of identity and tradition to be managed, contained or even dispersed. The residential grouping of migrants can take place within precise structural logics, from the search for accessible spaces to the consolidation

of self-help networks and economic mutualism, to the need to build a collective presence that makes survival possible in an often hostile context. Such dynamics of actual or perceived concentration, are often interpreted by previous residents and institutional actors as a factor disrupting the social and spatial equilibrium, and trigger alarmist discourses on the problematic nature of such supposed isolation. As a result of the intertwining of socio-economic inequalities and questions of ethnocultural belonging, a further redefinition of the urban landscape arises, with the emergence of forms of spatial polarisation that reflect, and sometimes amplify, pre-existing social divisions.

And yet, some of the first studies on urban communities (Anderson, 2006) and neighbourhood dynamics (Whyte, 1943) already noted how the arrival of new inhabitants and the progressive settling of migratory flows made cities spaces of continuous symbolic and material redefinition, as well as how, even in contexts characterised by potential tensions, networks of solidarity would emerge between neighbours or ‘neighbourhood coalitions’ capable of overcoming mere ethno-national affiliations, giving rise to new models of collective identity. Therefore, we can see that the city has always been the scene of constant negotiation, in which institutions try to regulate urban life through forms of urban planning, regulations on economic activities and residential policies, and often measures to limit or disperse excessive non-native visibility, all while individuals and migrant groups call for social recognition, public spaces suited to their needs, fair access to education and the labour market and, in some cases, protection from discrimination.

In her work on socio-residential segregation in southern European countries, for example, Arbaci (2007, 2019) emphasises that, although residential segregation is indeed a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, the assumption that spatial segregation is synonymous with social inequality is still prevalent. This is particularly true when such forms of segregation are linked to ethno-national minorities distinct from the majority group. Spatial concentration is therefore considered a more or less indirect indicator of the degree of social division and therefore a generator of poverty, marginalisation or exclusion, while socio-spatial desegregation and mixing are elevated to synonyms of social integration, inclusion or upward mobility, echoing the same hypothesis of the debates on dispersion processes and anti-concentration policies in a more optimistic light. Despite the fact that in southern European cities urban inequalities and

residential marginalisation are traditionally high, the spatial segregation between both native and foreign groups remains low and moderate, and therefore the patterns of ethnic concentration and urban processes seem to be very different from those described in North American and Northern European cities. However, terms such as ghetto, segregation and *separate* worlds have helped to reinforce this belief even outside the North American context from which they originated, through their pejorative connotations that resonate in the media, among policy makers and even in academic circles (see Arbaci 2019).

Places of social and spatial exclusion (Sibley, 2002) can have a dual dimension: on the one hand, they can be seen as spaces of mutual support, of economic solidarity networks, of protection against the precariousness of the urban context; on the other hand, they could represent places subject to marginalisation by the official dynamics of urban planning, remaining confined to a logic of parallel and subordinate development for future profit. In his studies on gentrification, Neil Smith (2005) showed how, in many cases, global real estate markets have strategically utilised the ethnic presence in cities, transforming it from an element of exclusion to a commercial resource, promoting exoticism as an added value for neighbourhoods undergoing economic development. While in some cases a selected part of local migrant groups can take advantage of this process to gain visibility and stability, for the wider majority of them the consequence tends to be their progressive expulsion from such areas, in favour of new middle classes and global investors (Rath, 2007). That said, the effects of the interplay between cities and migration should not be reduced to a clear-cut trajectory, nor to any universally valid pattern of inclusion or exclusion. Any experience of migration in an urban context is a mixture of assimilation and cultural negotiation, acceptance and stigmatisation, visibility and subordination. Stuart Hall (2015) and Homi Bhabha (2012) have explored this ambivalence by conceptualising the fluidity of identity and cultural hybridisation, showing how the identities of migrants don't just transfer their traditions to a new context, but create new spaces of belonging, where the original cultural codes mix with those of the place of settlement. Paul Gilroy (1994) developed this perspective with his theory of the diaspora, understood not as a static condition of distance from one's homeland, but as a dynamic experience, characterised by continuous exchanges and reconfigurations. These transformations can be the result of individual strategic choices, but also of economic and political pressures that force migrants towards specific

paths of integration or segregation. Similarly, in his reflections on emerging citizenship, James Holston (1999) drew attention on how migrant groups act strategically and position themselves in society, claiming rights and spaces for participation in the city through self-organisation, rather than passively accepting them. Against this background, Nancy Fraser (2008) offers a critique of those multicultural policies and initiatives that serve only as a mere façade, often limited to a symbolic recognition of diversity without intervening in the power structures and material inequalities that regulate access to resources. Beyond the recognition of difference, redistribution mechanisms are key to urban diversity policies, preventing them from becoming mere rhetorical operations. The long-debated model of segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993) stresses precisely how the intergenerational trajectories of migrants' involvement in society are not uniform, but depend on economic, social and institutional factors that result in different paths, often characterised by structural vulnerability and subtle forms of exclusion.

History shows that the relationship between western cities and diversity tends to be punctuated by periodic waves of xenophobia and violence against those perceived as outsiders (Cohen, 2016). However, in the same urban contexts, forms of experimentation in the governance of diversity have emerged, oriented towards the development of forms of 'cultural citizenship' (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Stevenson, 2003). This concept, however simplistic and controversial it may appear, insists on the promotion of infrastructures capable of favouring the daily inclusion of migrants – schools, health centres, multilingual libraries – nevertheless highlighting the inherent fragility of a precarious equilibrium: the ideal rhetoric of inclusion is destined to clash with powerful economic interests, often supported by global finance and real estate capital. Sassen (1991) and Smith (1996) clearly show how property speculation can lead to the expulsion of the most vulnerable groups to marginalised suburbs, undermining the same urban inclusion projects that, in the first instance, professed to be open and welcoming. In this sense, the city is configured as a space of unresolved tension between policies officially oriented towards inclusion and market logics that operate a systematic selection. Mitchell's (1995) reflections of public space management can be seen as emblematic in this respect: the advance of privatisation and the strengthening of surveillance mechanisms risk penalising those who do not have adequate resources or who, perceived as 'different', tend to be considered as intruders.

This process often deprives migrants of points of reference that are fundamental for their socialisation and for the construction of forms of collective belonging. It is therefore not surprising that precisely where urban living conditions become more stifling, grassroots resistance practices emerge: independent festivals, informal solidarity networks, cultural events and intercultural exchanges, capable of generating what Holston (2009) defines as insurgent citizenship. These are often spontaneous and informal initiatives that, by overcoming ethnically perceived barriers, involve large segments of the local population, creating opportunities for mutual recognition between different groups and reshaping the urban fabric in a participatory and dynamic way.

As we shall see later, in cities like Rome these speculative dynamics take on more nuanced contours, and the financial and speculative interests in the city become less global and more local, due to the relative marginality of the city in terms of attractiveness for such investments, but also due to the substantial absence of structural urban changes, in the absence of industrial areas or buildings to demolish and rebuild, and the premature nature of the process of touristification, which now appears to be fully developed, although still ongoing, and which has in fact already emptied the city centre of its long-term residents, new or old as they may be. The fact that a significant part of the real estate is privately owned, as we shall see, further complicates the application of standard theories on such processes of large-scale speculation or massive interventions in the residential composition of urban areas, by any actor, public or private. What is happening in Italy, therefore, mostly concerns the adoption of local regulations that recall a widespread idea of urban security, in which aspects of the fight against crime are extended to the protection of urban standards and the repression of behaviour that can disturb or annoy local citizens. These are measures that, although not openly hostile or discriminatory towards minority groups, are disguised as simple and irrevocable protection of urban decorum and security. In practice, we're talking of municipal ordinances or provisions that, in a more or less direct way, limit the rights of foreigners, such as obstacles to registration at the registry office or access to public housing, or else make their stay and their working activities more complicated. In neighbourhoods with a high concentration of foreign citizens, administrative checks on the regularity of licences, compliance with hygiene regulations and opening hours are often targeted at shops run by immigrants, while Italian businesses receive significantly fewer inspections. This 'commercial

profiling' produces indirect discrimination, since formally the rules apply to everyone, but they are applied based on heavily selective criteria (see for example (Ambrosini, 2013; Mantovan, 2018).

From this point of view, if a consistent visibility, coupled or not with a real concentration in terms of actual significant numbers, would seem to attract attention that is anything but positive, several studies have though highlighted the advantages and opportunities that such groupings can generate (see for example Dunn 1998), against the idea that some form of spatial and residential concentration of migrant communities should be interpreted exclusively as a manifestation of social disadvantage or as the result of processes of marginalisation. On the one hand, the interpretation of residential separation as a structured and visible form of *differentiated citizenship* proposed by Young (1999) allows us to understand how the possibility of sharing a space, despite differences, can be a right claimed by minority groups themselves. From this perspective, a certain degree of segregation is not just a condition of passive acceptance, but can represent an active survival strategy for marginalised families, as it allows reinforcing family and friendship support networks, guaranteeing a continuity of social capital that is fundamental in often hostile urban contexts, prevent racial harassment (Ehrkamp 2005) and favouring the grassroots resistance practices mentioned above. Rocco (1999) emphasises how spatial concentration can form a basis for the articulation of claims to full, thus not only abstractly *on paper*, citizen's rights, favouring the construction of collective synergies that find space both in the informal political arena and in more institutional circuits. In some cases, these forms of migrant urbanism emerge from organised protests and structured mobilisations, transforming the presence in the urban space into a real tool for political pressure (Leitner & Strunk 2014; Garbin & Millington 2018). In other cases, when migrant communities may lack the resources, organisational power or willingness to confront the authorities directly, the challenge to oppression takes more subtle, but no less political, forms. Bayat (2000) described these practices as *quiet encroachment*, or everyday strategies of appropriation of space that, through informal and self-organised use of the city, challenge existing norms and contribute to redefining the relationship between marginalised subjects and institutional power. These experiences show that the spatial organisation of migrant communities cannot be reduced to a stigmatising narrative that associates it solely with phenomena of exclusion and vulnerability. On the contrary, the significant presence of particular groups in specific urban areas

can constitute a form of resistance and a re-signification of space, allowing migrants to construct forms of belonging and recognition that go beyond the barriers imposed by nation states and dominant urban policies.

Nevertheless, all this raises questions about the possibility of achieving a real degree of communication and interaction between different groups that appear too cohesive in their differences, raising barriers that prevent interaction with the rest of society, making any path to integration problematic. As we shall see, discussions regarding principles of cohesion and the related policies of multiculturalism or interculturalism seem to take for granted that the situation in urban neighbourhoods prior to the arrival of non-national groups was characterised by the absence of divisions, frictions, incommunicability and heterogeneity. As we will see later, we know that this has never been the case, and that such 'risks' are the result, optimistically speaking, of a naïve yet no less significant historical short-sightedness. It is undeniable, however, that the meaning of 'living in the city' today increasingly implies recognising a complex web of connections, made up of flows of people, infrastructures, exchanges and forms of mediated communication that add further complexity to the dynamics of interaction and communication amongst micro-local social realities. The rise of satellite, digital, cable and internet technologies has further amplified the detachment of individuals from the purely local dimension, continuously reworking the relationships and meaning of proximity. We are talking about interconnections that simultaneously link diverse urban environments and world-wide systems of interaction, connecting distant places and continuously redefining the boundaries of urban spaces. Mobility, both physical and digital, intertwines proximity and distance, making the city extremely dynamic. Amin and Graham (1997) have already suggested that the urban fabric has to be conceived as a network in which global flows and local networks influence each other, producing dynamics that oscillate between proximity and distance, intimacy and anonymity. Anonymity is a feature of urban life (Wilson, 1991), and this can lead to a sense of isolation and anomie, due to a physical proximity that does not necessarily translate into effective social contact. Adams (1995) introduced the concept of spatio-temporal extensibility to describe the nature of these configurations: the capacity of economic and cultural relations to extend well beyond their local context, exploiting transport infrastructures and telecommunications networks. This explains why a city can be at the same time the place of dense and close face-to-face interactions – what Boden and Molotch (1994) called

the density of copresent interaction – and of virtual and technological links (Thrift 1996) extending beyond any physical boundary. This ‘extensibility’ contributes to shaping the city as a diverse space, in which close and distant networks intertwine, sometimes giving rise to new opportunities for cultural fusion, and sometimes to phenomena of disengagement. In urban contexts, in fact, we often observe a strong weakening of neighbourhood ties, while those mediated by virtual platforms, individual transport, and global labour and economic circuits are consolidated. Thrift (1996) emphasises how face-to-face interaction constitutes only one part of the urban mosaic, while long-distance connections produce affiliations and identities that can be independent of the physical territory. If we add migratory processes to these dynamics, the city reveals its multiple nature even more clearly: a place where simultaneity and fragmentation coexist, as well as neighbourly relations and lack of communication between those who live side by side in the same spaces. Within this complex framework, to misinterpret this interweaving of proximity and distance and to attribute the lack of cohesion, communicability and common ground to the embodied presence of newcomers in neighbourhoods, which does not necessarily translate into peaceful coexistence, but which is not the first and only source of reshuffling the cards, is highly problematic. In the absence of policies that actively address the issue, the risk of chronic conflict remains (Cohen 1996): majority groups, perceiving the arrival of newcomers as a threat, react with alarmist rhetoric, while immigrant communities, lacking effective protections, resort to rigid identity claims.

1.1.1 Ethnicity, race and the problem of full acceptance

Central to understanding the paths of inclusion and acceptance, especially over subsequent generations, is the way in which migrants negotiate ethnic, racial and national identities over the long term. Some of the literature has highlighted how, for example in the case of European migration to the United States, over time there has been a progressive fusion with the dominant population, raising the question of whether this pattern can also be applied to contemporary migrants, who are more markedly ‘non-white’. Gans (1979) introduced the concept of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ based on his observations of the descendants of European immigrants in the United States, who preserved elements of their ethnicity almost exclusively on ritual or festive occasions, moments that did not necessarily concern the central aspects of daily life such as career, marriage, residence (Alba 1990; Gans 1979). Waters (1990)

emphasises the optional nature of this ethnicity in the case of second-generation white Americans: being able to choose if and when to show it, they benefit from the specific privilege of not necessarily being perceived as “others”. In other words, the privilege of deciding *how* and *when* to express one's ethnic identity derives from the fact that the white group is already recognised as part of the nation and is not viewed with suspicion. This is a crucial point: symbolic ethnicity is never neutral, but presupposes a form of basic integration, a recognition that has already taken place. However, this ‘symbolic ethnicity’ may not be accessible to non-white populations: racial issues, with their historical and structural implications, end up conditioning the processes of inclusion and social mobility. An example is the case of African Americans: despite decades of anti-racist policies, there is still a structural gap that keeps the black population at a disadvantage, signalling that inclusion does not always follow a linear path (Portes & Rumbaut 2006). On the other hand, Telles and Sue (2019) emphasise that race is a fundamental factor, but not the only one capable of influencing ethnic persistence. Aspects such as the existence of community institutions, shared cultural practices and political participation can strengthen group belonging. This outlines a continuum between extreme ‘symbolic ethnicity’ and ‘strongly consequential ethnicity’, where identity can manifest itself intermittently or remain a fundamental pillar of daily life, influencing access to work, education and other resources.

On the contrary, focusing exclusively on racial discrimination would not be a fair way to explain the persistence of ethno-racial categorisation (Song 2003). Collective identity is articulated in values, community organisations, religious networks and individual choices: internal factors (linked to the preservation of traditions and relational capital) intersect with external dimensions (public policies, processes of racialisation, power hierarchies). This complexity is reflected in the idea of a ‘plurality of affiliations’ and the ‘coexistence of cohesion and separation’, which challenges any assumption of a unidirectional migratory path. Zetter and colleagues (2005) emphasise how migrant communities, like the native population, can give shape to multiple affiliations that coexist without necessarily coming into conflict. Consequently, migrants do not constitute uniform blocks destined for a single assimilation path, nor monolithic groups. On the contrary, their identities overlap, transform and adapt to the contexts in which they find themselves. This critical view openly challenges those diversity management policies that aim to label migrants in fixed

categories, unable to grasp their fluidity and multifaceted dimension. It is also essential to remember the active role of the States: data collection, citizenship regimes and the legal recognition of specific groups (or, on the contrary, their systematic invisibility) concretely influence the paths of inclusion or exclusion. Some countries, for example, have sophisticated statistical tools to monitor inequalities, while others prohibit ethnic classification, sometimes fuelling the illusion that diversity does not exist or is completely irrelevant.

It is in this context that the debate on diversity policies takes place: from multiculturalism, which openly recognises ethnic-cultural pluralism, to assimilation policies, which require adherence to a common set of values, discouraging the preservation of languages and customs of origin. In Europe, there is often tension between the rhetoric of national unity and the need to manage tangible cultural complexity, especially in urban areas. While more pragmatic strategies of inclusion are taking shape in many cities, at the national level there is sometimes a refusal to recognise multiculturalism for fear of fuelling identity-based divisions. Needless to say, policies of inclusion and exclusion do not operate in a vacuum: migrants maintain a network of transnational ties that connect their country of arrival to their country of origin and to other groups of fellow countrymen or fellow believers around the world. Consequently, belonging is not limited to a mere dualism of ‘integration versus separation’: migrants move on several levels, negotiating ties and opportunities both in the place of destination and in the place of departure. This is where hybridisation develops, but also where identity can become more rigid. However, it is undeniable that the asymmetrical distribution of power plays a fundamental role: ‘multiple’ passports and citizenships can be tolerated or even encouraged for some categories, while for others they become the object of mistrust and discrimination. And, in times of economic or political crisis, migrants become the favourite targets of populism, which raises symbolic and material boundaries, fuelling mechanisms of exclusion.

1.1.2 Approaches, practices and theories of urban diversity management

In recent decades, liberal-democratic societies have experimented with different models for managing diversity: multiculturalism, often contested because it is considered the root of ‘community closures’, and assimilationism, in turn accused of favouring forced homologation. Faced

with these tensions, some authors (for example Meer *et al.* 2016; Zapata-Barrero 2020) have proposed interculturalism as a strategy centred on the relationship between groups, with the aim of building shared values without erasing differences. However, this approach is not entirely neutral either: it too determines which aspects of diversity can be included and which should remain in the shadows to safeguard social cohesion.

It is essential to remember, as mentioned, that migrants do not passively undergo these policies and these assimilation processes, but constantly renegotiate them, taking advantage of transnational networks, sources of deterritorialised media imagery, and family, economic and cultural resources. In this way, integration into a new society is never linear, but is a constantly redefining process in which identity, belonging and affiliations are broken down and recomposed according to circumstances. The multiplicity of levels involved – local, national, global – and the constant oscillation between cohesion and separation require a critical revision of commonly used analytical categories.

As Zapata-Barrero (2022) observes, the field of migration studies is characterised by a tangle of methodological and conceptual approaches that often overlap or conflict with each other, without fully evaluating their epistemological significance. At the same time, the convergence of political strategies aimed at governing migratory flows has generated a sort of ‘conceptual contagion’, whereby notions born in specific contexts are transferred elsewhere, often without adequate critique or adaptation. These ‘passepartout concepts’ function as real devices of power, since they define what deserves attention, what is made invisible and what must be controlled. Studying migration, therefore, means dealing with categories that are never neutral, but full of political and ideological implications.

It is therefore essential to take a critical stance towards the language used to describe and interpret migration, if we are to avoid slipping into inappropriate labelling or simplistic generalisations. Since diversity is intertwined with far-reaching social, political and economic issues, the very choice of terms such as ‘integration’, ‘citizenship’, ‘multiculturalism’ influences the orientation of research, the development of public policies and the collective perception of migratory phenomena. It is precisely from critical reflection on these notions and on the forms of governing diversity that new perspectives can emerge, attentive to plurality and aware of the power relations that run through cities and contemporary societies.

All this makes it clear that, in a context in which multiculturalism, interculturalism and assimilationism often coexist in ambiguous forms, reflecting on the concepts and policies of diversity remains an essential challenge. It is not a question of finding a way to erase the tensions between distinct identities and shared values, but rather of recognising that these contradictions represent the very heart of the politics of belonging in contemporary societies. Accepting the existence of multiple points of view, questioning the genealogy of concepts and the practical implications that derive from them means admitting that integration is not a one-way journey, but rather a continuous and tireless negotiation between cultural perspectives, power relations and practices of resistance.

In light of these considerations, the need for critical reflection on the use of concepts becomes inevitable. For this reason, the following sections will offer as broad and in-depth an overview as possible, not only of the concepts already mentioned in this chapter, but also of other theoretical tools fundamental to addressing the phenomenon of urban migration.

1.2 Integration

Looking at the various works that deal with and investigate the concept of integration, attributing to it a definite meaning or a series of practices that are more or less delimitable or inherently coherent is no easy task. As Favell (2022) observes, integration is perhaps one of the most widely used concepts in migration studies, and yet one of the least critically and conceptually understood, which seems to be often used as a term, but rarely defined as a concept (Entzinger & Biezeveld 2003). In everyday language, Collyer and colleagues (2020) argue, the term *integration* is commonly used to refer to the process by which an individual or a specific group becomes part of society. As an analytical concept, it can also take on a broader meaning, referring to the overall cohesion of society itself, and the degree of interconnectedness among its members (Treibel 2015). In political discourse and social policies, this second meaning is generally expressed through concepts such as the *social cohesion* or *inclusiveness* of institutions and social systems. When in turn the discourse on integration is applied to migratory phenomena, it thus often tends to presuppose the existence of a cohesive and homogeneous society that, with the arrival of new groups, sees its unity under threat. This interpretative scheme leads to the construction of the presence of migrants as a potential factor of *disintegration*, above all

when they are described as *reluctant to integrate*, shifting the responsibility for inclusion entirely onto the shoulders of the new arrivals, without questioning the social and institutional structures that regulate the processes of belonging (Collyer *et al.* 2020).

The development of the concept of integration in Europe has its roots in the first post-World War II migratory movements, when attention was initially focused primarily on the workforce needed for post-war economic reconstruction. In the period preceding the First World War, the growing internationalisation of migratory flows coexisted with the formation of modern nation-states, which considered foreign workers to be ‘temporary’ and without full status (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003). Before 1914, it was relatively easy to move from one country to another, and phenomena such as the ‘migratory chain’ and transnational remittances took place within a framework of poorly guarded borders. However, with the emergence of a ‘methodological nationalism’ in the social sciences, it became almost automatic to consider society as enclosed within the state border and to imagine immigrants as anomalies or outsiders in relation to a criterion of national homogeneity (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003). After the Second World War, especially in Europe, the link between the welfare state and the concept of the nation state grew stronger: the need for labour for reconstruction led to the recruitment of ‘guest workers’, but without planning for their permanent settlement (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). Countries such as Germany and Switzerland relied on short-term hiring programmes that effectively excluded immigrant workers and their families from structured integration pathways (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003). At the same time, countries such as France and the United Kingdom, also due to their colonial ties, developed more open conceptions of immigrants with regard to the acquisition of citizenship, albeit with strong ambiguities regarding the recognition of cultural diversity (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). The turning point came in the 1970s, when the economic crisis made it clear that many foreign workers would no longer return to their countries of origin, raising the issue of their long-term integration (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003). In some contexts, a progressive legal and social inclusion was initiated: for example, in the Netherlands a multicultural approach took shape in which minorities benefited from specific programmes and collective rights. On the contrary, France maintained a more assimilationist line, claiming formal equality as the only basis for

integration, without publicly recognising differentiated cultural identities (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016).

The integration policy in Great Britain, developed as an alternative to the catastrophic rhetoric of the racist right in the 1960s has long been based on a dual principle: on the one hand, strict immigration control as a precondition for maintaining social cohesion; on the other hand, the recognition of a national plurality understood first in terms of multiraciality, then of multiculturalism (Modood 1992). For decades, this approach maintained a relatively stable consensus, managing to reconcile the political concern for social unity with the acceptance of a certain degree of diversity. However, as early as the 1970s and 1980s, the very terminology of *immigration and integration* began to be challenged. Ethnic minorities in the UK began to reject these categories, asserting instead a hybrid and plural British identity that was not subordinate to an idea of conditional inclusion. From this debate a new reflection on a *racially conscious* multiculturalism took shape – a vision that, while claiming full citizenship for minorities, remained anchored to a British conception of diversity (Gilroy 1987).

If in the UK the discourse on integration had been temporarily downgraded, in France, it would instead assert itself as a central device of nation-state construction, marking a return to republican universalism as a means of absorbing post-colonial and migrant diversity within a unified society (Favell 2020).

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), for example, defines integration as

The process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. Integration refers to a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies, and implies consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kinds of services and the labour market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose (IOM 2011)

The term seems thus to have gained ground when many scholars and policy makers sought to move away from the idea of assimilation, attempting to develop a broader and less overtly unidirectional and patronizing concept. In this sense, the term is open to a range of uses, from the most rigid model

of adaptation to white Western ethnocultural codes (Casey 2016), to an idealised image of intercultural exchange and mutual recognition (Guidikova, 2015). Either way, according to a large part of the literature on the topic (see among others Favell 2005, 2019, 2022; Gargiulo 2018; Schinkel 2017, 2018; Magazzini 2020) the concept, despite the claims of reciprocity as shown in the words of OIM, still rests on a monodirectional attitude and on the idea that integration is a process that starts from a fault, a deficiency in the migrant, which can only be resolved by following the right path. In his *Imagined Societies* (2017), Schinkel develops a complex critique of the concept of integration, and how it relates to the definition and management of difference in contemporary societies. Referring to Appadurai (1996), he highlights how the image of ethnicity, traditionally linked to defined geographical spaces, has been progressively dissolved by the processes of economic and cultural globalisation, making ethnicity itself a 'global force', capable of escaping the boundaries imposed by states and circulating through transnational interconnections. Precisely for this reason, Schinkel argues, we are now witnessing a strengthening of state mechanisms for governing difference, which aim to reinscribe ethnicity within national and administrative frameworks, attributing to it meanings and functions that respond to the needs of social control.

In this perspective, integration becomes a technology of government, an essential element in the processes through which states attempt to discipline and categorise populations, constructing categories through which society is made predictable, measurable and governable. Schinkel introduces the concept of governing through integration, a strategy that is not limited to the integration of migrants, since it actually defines and disciplines the society as a whole through its opposite. In fact, the discussion on integration always implies a mirror representation between those who are already part of society and those who have yet to prove that they belong. In this way, 'society' is transformed into a tangible object, something apparently defined and recognisable, an entity with which people can identify and from which a clear separation can be drawn with respect to what still needs to be 'integrated'. Schinkel defines this process as the domestication of difference, an operation that takes place on two levels: on the one hand, the difference is domesticated in the sense that it is made less threatening, its potentially subversive elements neutralised; on the other hand, it is incorporated into the national narrative, becoming part of the collective imagination in a depoliticised form that is functional to the dominant logic. This

domestication process is what transforms difference into diversity. Diversity, in this sense, is nothing more than an acceptable version of difference, filtered through a liberal lens that eliminates its conflicting elements and turns it into a marketable commodity, expendable in the tourism market, in urban policy and in the rhetoric of territorial branding. Diversity, thus constructed, is no longer something that challenges the limits of liberalism, that questions society in its fundamental assumptions, but becomes a controlled and exploitable resource, conforming to an idea of liberalism with no real confrontation with anything that might undermine its foundations.

Integration, therefore, seems to serve above all to maintain and reproduce a well-defined narrative of migration. Conceptually, it defines the migrant as a subject progressing along a pathway which must inevitably culminate in integration into the social and economic institutions of the host society and, in the best-case scenario, the attainment of citizenship (Gargiulo 2021; Favell, 2022). This view ignores not only the transnational dimension of mobility, but also the fact that the migrant's journey is never linear nor necessarily aimed at full membership of the host society. Seen from this perspective, the concept of integration appears to be a nation-building device, a mechanism through which the State exercises its power both externally, defining who can enter and who is excluded, and internally, disciplining new arrivals and trying to transform newcomers into well-behaved citizens who conform to a pre-established idea of belonging.

Integration, often treated as a technical and sectoral issue, thus loses its political dimension when applied to specific areas of society, such as the labour market or housing policies. In this way, it tends to be considered a neutral process, a simple adaptation between different groups, ignoring the fact that it is instead deeply intertwined with nation building. The entire integration paradigm develops within a framework that takes the borders of the nation-state as a given (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), without ever questioning how these borders are produced, reproduced and reinforced. From this perspective, integration is not so much a descriptive concept as a political operation, a device that continually redefines the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, between those who are considered part of the citizenry and those who remain in otherness.

The apparent neutrality of the term masks a very specific operation: as Favell (2022) points out, what is presented as an empirical analysis of the shortcomings of certain migrant groups is in fact part of a functionalist paradigm that constantly recurs in research on integration policies. This

paradigm starts from an idealised theoretical model that establishes a priori what it means to be *integrated into* society, and then applies it as a criterion for evaluating the alleged deficiencies of certain minority groups. The failure of integration is not attributed to structures of exclusion and domination, but to specific cultural characteristics of the migrant communities, accused of keeping their members in a condition of backwardness. The public narrative cyclically re-proposes well-known arguments, as it is often claimed that ethnic ties or a *culture of poverty* are the real obstacles to the full realisation of certain groups (Casey, 2016; Portes and Landolt, 1996), or that some religious cultures are responsible for the reproduction of oppressive practices - especially towards women - and that only the abandonment of these traditions would allow the *full development* of the individual (Korteweg, 2017). The subtext is that autonomy, individual consciousness and progress would only be possible through a progressive detachment from one's cultural origins, an alignment with the values of the majority society.

In a provocative intervention published in the *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies*, once more Schinkel (2018) argues that the concept of integration has failed both as a political tool to describe the process through which migrants settle, and as an analytical category in the social sciences to study such processes, thus problematising not only the concept of integration itself, but also the role that academic research, public institutions and political discourse have played in constructing and operationalising it as an instrument of monitoring and stigmatisation. The social science of immigrant integration is a typically 'modern' endeavour, Schinkel observes, in the sense that it assumes the position of societal judge. The idea that integration can be 'measured', in fact, would necessarily imply the construction of criteria and parameters that separate those who are 'fully in' and those who remain in a liminal position, always suspended between acceptance and exclusion.

To better understand this position, in a previous work Schinkel (2017) shows how most research on social dynamics continues to be based on organicist assumptions, conceiving society as a cohesive entity, with defined boundaries and a more or less stable identity. While there has been a progressive shift away from these notions in a large part of social theory, these assumptions remain embedded, often implicitly, in the work of social scientists. This is particularly evident in the field of integration studies, where the idea of an integrated and homogenous society serves as a yardstick to measure the degree of 'integration' of minority groups.

As Schinkel (*ibid.*) points out, Christina Boswell (2009) distinguishes two main symbolic functions of scientific knowledge in public policy. On the one hand, it has a legitimising function: a policy appears more credible when it is presented as being based on research and expertise. On the other hand, knowledge has a substantiating function: in particularly controversial areas, the data provided by experts doesn't necessarily influence the content of policies, yet it reinforces and justifies existing political preferences. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the way in which expertise on integration is mobilised in Europe. Schinkel emphasises that the use of research as a resource is actually quite rare: policies are not built on empirical evidence, but rather rely on it to reinforce already established narratives. One reason for this lack of application is that quantitative data on integration – for example, the scores of specific ethnic groups on integration scales – do not have an immediate practical applicability. A second reason is that these same data take on a mainly symbolic role, or, as Schinkel suggests, an imaginary role. Boswell identifies two symbolic uses that are fundamental to understanding how expertise on immigrant integration is used in political discourse. Data is used to legitimise political concerns about integration, creating a sense of urgency that justifies certain public interventions. When the numbers highlight a supposed ‘integration crisis’, they serve to construct an imaginary in which integration is always seen as incomplete or problematic. At the same time, quantitative data provide policy with something ‘concrete’ to work with, delimiting areas of intervention and identifying specific groups as problematic. In this way, statistics on integration end up hierarchising ethnic groups, highlighting geographical asymmetries and identifying institutional contexts from which integration policies can be implemented. In other words, this process is anything but neutral: data are collected to describe an ‘objective’ reality, but with assumptions that actively contribute to the construction of the ‘problem’ of integration. Schinkel suggests, therefore, that the production and use of scientific knowledge on these issues is often anything but disinterested, halfway between naïve trust and the need to give relevance and usefulness to one's job, constituting an integral part of the way European societies define the boundaries between those who fully belong and those who constantly remain under observation. Integration, therefore, would not be an inevitable social process, but a technology of power that organises and disciplines difference.

Despite such ample criticisms of the concept of integration, some scholars have engaged in its defence, arguing that, if suitably reformulated and filtered through alternative critical lenses, it can still remain a useful analytical tool. Its applicability, according to this perspective, would not be undermined by the fact that it has been historically co-opted by public policy and reduced to a governance mechanism; on the contrary, separating it from its normative implications would allow it to be developed as an autonomous conceptual category, independent of political agendas and capable of grasping the dynamics of social inclusion in a more complex manner (Klarenbeek 2019; Penninx 2019). An evocative perspective on this point is offered by Penninx who, in one of his articles (Penninx 2019) written specifically in response to Schinkel, acknowledges that confusion surrounding the term integration is indeed real and that, both at the policy level and in government-funded research, the concept is sometimes subject to normative and rhetorical distortions. Governments, Penninx argues, are by definition oriented toward pursuing certain social outcomes, establishing rules, requirements, and “integration” criteria. Research, on the other hand, when operating on a strictly descriptive and independent level, should not be required to adopt those same normative goals as its own. Yet, when public debate becomes heated and politicized, the notion of integration begins to bear unilateral judgments, often implicitly blaming migrants for “failing to integrate.” Based on these premises, Penninx admits that Schinkel’s concern is partially valid: government funding may shape the way scholarship is conducted, since it is more straightforward to investigate what political agendas deem relevant, risking the adoption of their frames. Nonetheless, building on works that have mapped the interplay between research and policy – such as those by Boswell (2009), Favell (2003), and Scholten (2011) – Penninx maintains that the relationship between the political sphere and academia is not invariably reduced to a purely instrumental logic. He underscores instead that the scientific literature on integration is richer and more complex than Schinkel acknowledge. In this regard, he cites the contributions of Esser (1980, 2004), Heckmann (1981, 2006, 2015), Bommes (2012), and Hoffmann-Nowotny (1973), all studies within sociology or the wider social sciences that endeavour to describe migrants’ settlement processes as a set of reciprocal interactions between those arriving and the receiving society. In that view, Penninx writes, integration is not a term dictating how migrants “must” behave or the extent to which they have “failed” to adapt; rather, it designates a phenomenon to be examined as a

process of inclusion of newcomers into pre-existing systems (Esser 2004), or, in Heckmann's (2006) words, a process lasting generations, consisting of the insertion of migrants into the central institutions of the receiving society. According to Penninx, the existence of these theoretical underpinnings refutes the idea that Western or European scholarship is entirely subservient to a problematic, colonial depiction of migrants.

To give substance to this position, Penninx proposes an analytical model of integration, which he describes as "heuristic" rather than normative, focusing on the relationship between migrants and the receiving society across three dimensions and three levels. The three dimensions are: the legal-political dimension, which examines migrants' legal status, access to civil and political rights, and possibilities for naturalization or electoral participation; the socio-economic dimension, which considers conditions in the labor market, access to suitable housing, the education system, and public services; and lastly, the cultural-religious dimension, which concerns perceptions of "otherness" and reciprocal identity representations – namely, the extent to which the host society accepts or rejects cultural and religious plurality. Each of these dimensions, in turn, is analyzed on three levels: the individual level (the choices made by individual migrants and natives), the organizational level (migrant associations and majority-society groups such as trade unions or churches, which can either support or hinder inclusion), and the institutional level (the rules, norms, policies, and established practices, including informal ones, that regulate access to rights and resources). According to this framework, studying integration solely by "measuring" individual migrants' degree of cultural adaptation or by looking only at individual socio-economic indicators risks overlooking potential discrimination or the "filters" imposed by the context. At the same time, Penninx notes that legal status directly impacts many other dimensions: for instance, a migrant who does not have a regular residence permit cannot enjoy the same educational or job opportunities and is often excluded from public life (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016; Penninx 2019). And yet, the definition of integration given by Penninx as a compendium of his model is that it basically consists in the process of becoming an accepted part of society, not problematizing such a generalization of society as a fictive subject in charge of accepting, nor who takes charge of judging, and most of all the fact that the same legal status he addresses as compromising the degree of integration is, in turn, actually usually granted by such measurements.

This point should be paired with an interesting concept from Schinkel's (2018) analysis of integration *dispensation*, according to which certain categories of the population – primarily those who are white and considered native – are never measured in terms of integration. In other words, the indigenous segment of society is perceived as ontologically integrated, regardless of religious practice, lifestyle, economic status, or educational level. It is a status of neutrality that does not require statistical or research-based validation, as though *normality* were an automatic attribute of those who have lived in the country longer, or ostensibly forever. When data are presented suggesting that certain 'ethnic groups' allegedly fail to meet the educational standards of the white majority, racist stereotypes are reinforced, and the notion of a cultural deficit or unwillingness to adapt becomes more entrenched. Framing the problem solely as one of individual integration, focusing on those who must *catch up* to dominant standards, masks instances of discrimination or institutional barriers (in the labour market, school system, or housing) that create or perpetuate inequalities. Conversely, when an increase in religious observance is noted among minorities, it is quickly interpreted as evidence of a lack of secularization – and therefore insufficient integration – rather than as a reminder that European societies themselves host active and diverse religious communities. Thus, the fiction of a purely secular and modern 'society' remains intact, and any departure from this ideal is portrayed as a shortcoming of migrants. As Schinkel reiterates, the apparent methodological neutrality surrounding such data plays a decisive role in upholding this narrative, offering figures that seem beyond challenge and open to only one, straightforward interpretation. Despite these considerations, the discourse of integration continues to wield strong influence over applied research and public policy, especially within the European Union. Refugee studies and urban inclusion policies remain firmly anchored to this conceptual framework, using it as a metric for defining goals, assessing results, and justifying interventions in the urban fabric. This enduring reliance highlights the profoundly institutionalized nature of integration as a lens for interpreting social realities, while also underscoring how difficult it is to envision migration policies free from this framework.

1.3 Multiculturalism or Interculturalism?

In contemporary discourses on how liberal democracies should administer ethno-cultural diversity, two paradigms emerge, multiculturalism and interculturalism, that, while presenting themselves as responses to the same political challenge, seem to operate with different assumptions. Both are offered as tools to manage tensions in pluralist societies, to prevent phenomena of social fragmentation, to guarantee equal access to institutions and to stem the reproduction of systemic discrimination. The difference between the two models, however, does not simply boil down to the choice of instruments of intervention, but concerns the very idea of diversity, the way in which it is codified and legitimised and, above all, the way in which the state arrogates to itself the right to define its limits and establish the conditions of its acceptability (Banting 2022).

As Charles W. Mills pointed out, multiculturalism has been constructed more as a *conceptual grab bag* than as a coherent paradigm, a container into which issues of 'race', culture and identity have converged without a clear theoretical structure, defined basically by everything that didn't fit into the traditional political map of the 1950s (Mills 2007). This suggests that multiculturalism, rather than a model with a well-defined internal logic, has been elaborated through a process of accumulation in which political strategies and public narratives overlapped, layering emergent responses rather than constructing a systematic theory of diversity.

As a normative perspective and policy tool, multiculturalism gained ground in the second half of the twentieth century, when minority groups with different statuses and histories – Indigenous peoples, sub-state national communities, and new waves of migrants – began mobilizing to challenge the exclusionary structures of democratic states (Castles & Miller 2009). Their claims did not stop at denouncing blatant forms of exclusion, but also questioned the very principle that integration must happen through assimilation into a pre-existing national identity. Multiculturalism took on clearer contours in Canada starting in the 1960s and 1970s, where it received institutional recognition with the adoption of the first multicultural policies, and later found fertile ground in other contexts, notably the United Kingdom and Australia (Kymlicka 1995). It arose in response to the need to highlight the ethnic, linguistic, and religious pluralism of post-colonial and post-war societies, as well as to address the growing activism of minority groups demanding representation that went beyond purely individual rights (Modood 2007). At the same time, multiculturalism became intertwined with

debates on how to structure citizenship so that individuals and groups – especially those with a history of discrimination – could fully participate in political and cultural life (Parekh 2006). This led to a set of arguments aimed at legitimizing the cultural specificity of these minorities, asserting that their recognition could not be reduced to the formally neutral application of liberal rights, and rejecting the ideal of assimilation or the melting pot. Multiculturalism thus emerged as a distinct integration strategy that could offer practical benefits in democracies characterized by diversity, given its premise that ethnic minorities have a legitimate interest in preserving their own culture and traditions, and that public institutions should accommodate these features in their rules and practices (Kastoryano 2018; Banting 2022). In this early phase, it also became clear that ‘difference’ should not merely be tolerated but embraced as a collective resource, one whose protection fosters a sense of belonging to the nation-state (Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000). Indeed, early multicultural policies highlighted the importance of going beyond a formal principle of equality by also granting symbolic and institutional recognition to ethnocultural specificities (Kymlicka 2005).

In contemporary political and academic discourse, the term multiculturalism acquires a multifaceted semantic range, with multiple layers of meaning and implications. As several studies have shown (Bloemraad et al. 2008; Kymlicka & Banting 2013), it may take on both a passive-descriptive and an active-normative sense. In the first case, it seems to refer simply to the peaceful coexistence of various cultures within the same social space (Kastoryano 2018; Kolbe 2015). Under some interpretations, multiculturalism merely seeks the public recognition of cultural differences without introducing tangible measures to support minority groups – a form we might call *passive*, in which diversity is celebrated but not necessarily backed by redistribution or participatory policies (Bloemraad et al. 2008). This symbolic approach, which has had some application in places such as Germany (Schönwälder 2006), is more concerned with highlighting difference than with transforming social hierarchies. By contrast, an *active* approach regards multiculturalism as a set of policies aimed at fostering genuine political and social inclusion of minorities, ensuring not only recognition but also voice and agency. From this perspective, equality would not be achieved through uniformity, but by creating conditions for equal participation, as shown by experiences in contexts, again, such as Canada (Kymlicka 2012). These measures can

involve concrete initiatives like funding cultural and linguistic minority organizations, providing legal exemptions (for instance, regarding dress codes), offering bilingual education or mother-tongue instruction, securing representation in public media, recognizing multiple citizenship, and even adopting affirmative action policies (Kymlicka & Banting 2013). The theoretical basis of this approach is rooted in human rights and liberal principles, particularly the idea that every individual should be free to express and maintain their cultural identity – especially when this expression represents a form of reparation for past injustices or systemic discrimination (Kymlicka 2001). In this light, inclusion would not be merely an individual process of adapting to the majority society's values, nor is it the impersonal application of some abstract principle of legal equality. As Kymlicka (1995) and Parekh (2006) argue, multicultural policies needed to go beyond just safeguarding civil and political rights, incorporating forms of recognition and concrete support so that minorities could uphold their identities without giving up their cultural references. This was the thrust of the early multicultural policies explicitly adopted in countries like Canada and Australia, which formally recognized cultural pluralism and introduced a variety of institutional measures ranging from mother-tongue education and legal exemptions for religious attire to funding for ethnic associations.

However, putting these principles into practice has given rise to different interpretations and applications. Often, these vary between those who emphasize the symbolic recognition of difference and those who focus on structural equality. Moreover, with increasing migration flows and the diversification of newcomers' backgrounds, there is growing debate over the alleged weaknesses of multiculturalism. A key issue in this respect, especially in Europe, concerns the role of Islam. With the growth of the Muslim population due to postcolonial immigration and family reunification, an intense debate emerged over the limits of a multiculturalism seen by some as too lenient toward demands that might undermine liberal values and principles of secularism (Joppke 2004; Hansen 2006). In various public contexts, cultural practices – for instance, female genital mutilation or forced marriage – have been conflated in the collective and political imagination with religious prescriptions, fostering narratives that depict Islam as representing a set of values fundamentally at odds with Western notions of gender equality and individual freedom (Field 2007; Meer and Modood 2009). This perception has heightened mistrust of multicultural policies, deemed overly permissive or short-sighted when faced with potential

illiberal tendencies. Studies such as the one by Kymlicka (2005) show that, in several Western countries, opposition to multiculturalism was proportionally tied to the view of Islam as “irreducible” to majority norms. At the same time, voices within Muslim communities themselves note that certain media stereotypes have tended to obscure the diversity of religious perspectives, encouraging a monolithic and sometimes hostile reading of Islam (Parekh 2006). As Lentin and Titley (2012) observe, the debate on the so-called “crisis” of multiculturalism has come to occupy a central place in European political rhetoric especially since the events of 9/11, which profoundly reshaped the relationship between diversity and security, shifting the focus from cultural recognition to the control and regulation of minorities. Until the 1990s, multiculturalism was often presented as a mechanism for inclusion. In the following years, however, it was progressively delegitimized: more and more frequently, public discourse blamed it for fostering segregation and social fragmentation. This shift intensified after the 2004 attacks in Madrid and the 2005 attacks in London, which fueled the narrative that multiculturalism had not supported social cohesion but rather led minority communities to become isolated. The events of 2015 and 2016 in France and Belgium further radicalized this discourse, making the connection between diversity and security threats even more explicit and paving the way for an even stricter redefinition of migration and diversity-management policies. A recurring criticism was that emphasizing collective affiliations and “strong” identities risked promoting divisions, encouraging forms of “communal closure,” and neglecting the need for a common framework (Goodhart 2004; Joppke 2004). Critics pointed in particular to multiculturalism’s relativistic stance, which they argued legitimized traditional or religious practices in conflict with individual rights – especially concerning gender issues or freedom of expression – thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to combat practices that violate people’s rights, such as forced marriage (BRAP 2012). It was in this critical climate that interculturalism gained momentum – sometimes proposed as an alternative, other times as a supplement to multiculturalism (Booth 2003; Wood et al. 2006). Interculturalism is thus presented as a “post-multicultural” approach that recognizes the coexistence of different cultures but, above all, is oriented towards their active interaction, rejecting both the idea of total homogenization typical of assimilationism and the “ethnic separation” associated with certain forms of multiculturalism. Instead, it proposes a model of unity in diversity rooted in dialogue, interaction,

cohesion, and mutual respect (see, for example, Zapata-Barrero 2017, 2022; Bouchard 2011; Maxwell et al. 2012). Critics of multiculturalism have consistently highlighted the risk that placing too much weight on collective rights or granting exemptions from general rules might encourage the emergence of closed cultural enclaves or “parallel societies” (Barry 2001; Cantle 2012). According to this view, any form of recognition that hinges excessively on group identity could paradoxically become a factor of separation rather than integration – especially where claims of self-determination (such as those advanced by Indigenous peoples or national minorities, as in the cited Canadian example) get conflated with the demands of more recent minority arrivals, who primarily seek fairer conditions of inclusion. Indeed, it is precisely this semantic confusion between the two levels that, according to some (Meer & Modood 2012; Kymlicka 2007, 2016), has fueled a distorted perception of multiculturalism, accused of promoting “social segmentation” even in contexts where migrant minorities are essentially calling for integrative inclusion (Joppke 2018).

Thus, the decline of multiculturalism and the rise of interculturalism as a new dominant paradigm appears as being not only a conceptual evolution, but rather the outcome of a broader political and ideological realignment. In this process, the recognition of diversity becomes ever more contingent on its compatibility with a normative and value-based framework that rules out forms of otherness deemed incompatible with the pre-existing national identity. This shift fits into a more general problem related to how states, depending on the circumstances, may legitimize or reject cultural claims, often oscillating between accommodation measures and a rhetoric of security exceptions, particularly after the traumatic attacks mentioned earlier and the overall climate that followed. One of interculturalism’s core arguments is that the “superdiversity” (Vertovec 2007) of contemporary societies cannot be effectively managed by simply recognizing groups alongside one another. Rather, it demands ongoing dialogue, active participation, and constructive engagement in which identities are continuously reworked (Powell and Sze 2004; Hammer 2004). The goal is not the static preservation of predefined differences but the construction of a shared space that emerges through hybridization and mutual negotiation (Booth 2003). In some interpretations – such as neighborhood-level initiatives or school-related policies – interculturalism translates into practices aimed at fostering daily contact and cooperation, without explicitly seeking to alter institutional frameworks (Hammer 2004). In others, it takes

on a more distinctly political dimension, as seen in Québec, where it was set in contrast to Canadian multiculturalism and connected to a Québécois identity project that upholds the French language as a collective good, rather than limiting everything to a purely individualistic conception of rights (Rocher et al. 2007; Bouchard 2011). In this sense, interculturalism appears to rest on the idea of a public sphere unified by a shared identity base, yet open to the contributions of new groups in reshaping its historical components (Gagnon and Iacovino 2007). Interculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, would thus place dialogue and mutual contact between groups in everyday interaction spaces at the core of its theoretical and practical framework. It rests on the notion that intercultural contact, meaningful exchange among people from different sociocultural backgrounds, and adherence to shared values represent effective tools for confronting the complexity of super-diverse societies (Mansouri 2022), while avoiding the risk of separate “bubbles” plagued by lack of communication or mixing, all risks basically associated with multiculturalism. Although it takes up some of multiculturalism’s principles, such as recognizing diversity as a key element of modern societies, authors like Zapata-Barrero (2020) maintain that interculturalism goes beyond it by questioning the rigidity of cultural categories and their crystallization within static ethnic boundaries. It is precisely this emphasis on relationships and on the need to foster exchange among groups that has led certain advocates of interculturalism to present it not merely as an alternative but even as a model intended to replace multiculturalism, especially in cases where the latter is seen as having endorsed the development of closed, self-referential communities (Cantle 2012; Zapata-Barrero 2015).

Other interpretations of interculturalism focus on recognizing sub-state identities (Gagnon and Iacovino 2007), positioning it as a discourse that protects and reinterprets already-established forms of “minority” nationalism, so as to include additional migratory flows within a reconfigured collective identity (Kymlicka 1995). There are also more “apolitical” readings, aimed at encouraging interethnic artistic production, cultural cooperation, or inclusive practices at the local level (Powell & Sze 2004; Wood et al. 2006). In both cases, proponents of interculturalism generally highlight a sharper focus on interaction and reciprocal change between majorities and minorities, as opposed to the image of multiculturalism as freezing differences in sealed compartments (Alev 2007). Many observers thus note that, compared to multiculturalism,

interculturalism pays greater attention to relationships among individuals and local groups in civil society, rather than the broad, national-level governmental approach to cultural minorities (Levey 2012). Furthermore, the idea has taken hold that interculturalism is especially well-suited to local or “urban” policy contexts (Marconi and Ostanel 2016), as demonstrated by the Council of Europe’s “Intercultural Cities” program (2008) and numerous municipal initiatives aimed at fostering exchange and proximity among various ethnic groups. Accordingly, interculturalism aims at deconstructing the logic of categorisation, which often crystallises cultural differences into rigid patterns, ignoring the dynamic dimension of the processes of belonging and daily negotiation. Its objective would be to remove the obstacles that prevent meaningful contact, reduce social distances and reorient daily interactions, with the ambition of normalising diversity not as a concession to specific ethnic or cultural minorities, but as a condition bringing benefits to society as a whole. Interculturalism, in other words, would be concerned not solely with redefining rights or their distribution, but with transforming the everyday experience of living together. A further development in the debate unfolds within the framework of “intercultural citizenship.” Building on the work of Zapata-Barrero (2020) and earlier multicultural theories developed by Kymlicka (1995) and Parekh (2000), some scholars argue that a robust democracy cannot merely recognise cultural rights in principle, but must also ensure that all individuals – whether they belong to majority or minority groups - can develop “the interactive capacities required for ongoing dialogue” across all spheres of social life. From this perspective, citizenship is no longer understood as a static legal status, but as a process of interaction, a strategy for managing the dynamics of encounter (Zapata-Barrero 2020). Zapata-Barrero’s elaborations on intercultural citizenship would therefore aim to go beyond both the rigid multiculturalism/interculturalism dichotomy and the purely normative conception of diversity. The proposal is to acknowledge that multiculturalism provides an infrastructure of rights and protection against discrimination, while interculturalism focuses on everyday relationships in shared spaces, encouraging the “social construction” of identities. From this point of view, interculturalism would not simply mean redefining rights, but creating contact zones in which groups can interact without facing prejudice or barriers to access.

However, as critical literature has pointed out (Favell 1998, 2021), the obsession with measuring how closely minorities conform to majority

standards in employment or education runs the risk of overlooking forms of systemic discrimination embedded within institutions. The danger is that the integration paradigm, even when reframed through an intercultural lens, may become a tool of domination if the very model used to assess the “success” of integration is not itself brought into question. It is on such contradictions that the need emerges for a truly “hybrid” approach, capable of combining a solid multicultural foundation (resisting all forms of exclusion or forced assimilation) with intercultural policies that promote mutual understanding and help to overcome distrust. It should also be noted that many of the qualities claimed by interculturalism are already present in the more complex versions of multiculturalism, which have long stressed the importance of linking group recognition to a shared sense of civic belonging (Modood 2007; Kastoryano 2018; Kymlicka 2016). In fact, the intercultural proposal often overlaps its critique of simplified readings of multiculturalism with a desire to foster collective participation and to oppose illiberal practices, objectives that also characterise dialogical interpretations of multiculturalism (Bader 2005; Parekh 2006). Moreover, the risks of an unconscious “majoritarianism” would not disappear simply by introducing intercultural policies: wherever a unifying core identity is promoted, one must ask how to ensure that this core does not merely reflect the dominant culture, imposing on minorities the primary burden of adaptation (Alev 2007). As a result, it remains uncertain to what extent interculturalism truly constitutes an alternative paradigm, rather than a variant that pushes multiculturalism to renew itself. Where interculturalism simply downplays the role of groups in abstract terms, it risks overlooking the specific ways in which certain identities – particularly those perceived as “problematic,” as already noted with the case with Muslims in many European countries – encounter obstacles and hostility severe enough to complicate any form of integration (Field 2007). From this perspective, the need clearly emerges to include the religious dimension, and in particular the complex Muslim reality, in the discussion on how to build inclusive citizenship, since the tension between religious differences and public values has taken on enormous symbolic weight in contemporary debate (Meer & Modood 2009). Some scholars, in fact, question the very idea that there is a sharp divide between the two paradigms, arguing that the opposition between multiculturalism and interculturalism is partly constructed and often exaggerated. Banting (2022) observes that there is no deep incompatibility between multicultural policies and intercultural initiatives. Within this

framework, the narrative of interculturalism as a remedy for failed multiculturalism has sometimes been interpreted as a new *myth*, a rhetorical strategy to support pro-diversity claims and to counter fight the instrumental use of the *now-contaminated* concept of multiculturalism by populist forces. In this sense, interculturalism appears more as a new policy *narrative* than as a rigorous socio-scientific diagnosis (Kymlicka 2012, 2016).

In light of the most recent research, what emerges is a vision that could be described as “multicultural integration” – one that does not oppose the dimension of rights to that of relational processes, but instead combines normative accommodations with everyday dynamics of iterative encounter (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). This perspective aligns with the idea of a transformative framework for society as a whole (Mansouri 2022) and echoes Zapata-Barrero’s (2020) emphasis on the interactive dimension of citizenship. Many scholars insist that multicultural policies can coexist with forms of civic integration and with intercultural initiatives, confirming that seemingly different strategies can complement and reinforce one another (Banting 2022). A case in point is Australia, where federal policies reflect many multiculturalist principles, including legal protections for minority cultural practices, while at the municipal and school levels, strategies based on deliberate intercultural contact are implemented to encourage interaction (Mansouri & Modood 2021). A similar dynamic can be observed in Québec, where the province has passed legislation prohibiting public employees from wearing religious garments (Banting 2022), while at the same time promoting a version of interculturalism that upholds the primacy of the French language and encourages minority participation in a shared civic culture (Bouchard and Taylor 2008). Despite certain contradictions, the Canadian debate demonstrates how multicultural institutional structures and local intercultural approaches can coexist and give rise to hybrid forms of diversity governance.

Critical literature on integration, however, warns that both multiculturalism and interculturalism may remain tied to a national paradigm that continues to reproduce the “us–them” logic (Favell 1998; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). To continue thinking in terms of integration means to continue thinking like a nation-state, in the sense that the very idea of who needs to be integrated and who is already considered part of society reflects a power of definition that is often skewed in favour of the majority (Scott 1998). While some scholars argue that the local and municipal approach of interculturalism (Zapata-Barrero 2020; Mansouri 2022; Marconi and Ostanel

2016) may help mitigate this imbalance through everyday practices of proximity and exchange, others highlight the persistence of structural power asymmetries that cannot be resolved through “dialogue” alone. Promoting intercultural contact without addressing structural inequalities and entrenched discrimination risks producing superficial outcomes. This is why more recent studies increasingly discuss how interculturalism and multiculturalism might operate in a complementary way – especially insofar as the former emphasises the relational, proximity-based dimension, while the latter provides a framework of legal and political safeguards against exclusion. It is here that the need re-emerges for a combination of multicultural policies, capable of offering solid normative and protective foundations, and intercultural initiatives that foster encounters between groups under conditions of parity. Without these two pillars, Banting (2022) argues, it is difficult to tackle the forms of discrimination and material inequality that prevent genuine and equal interethnic exchange. Thus, while the emphasis on “intercultural citizenship” seeks to move beyond the fixity of group identities, there remains the need to acknowledge that certain minorities remain structurally disadvantaged and require specific protections.

Within the broader frameworks of multiculturalism and interculturalism, a parallel discussion has emerged concerning the role of “culture” and “ethnicity,” often focused on the tensions between, on the one hand, the recognition of diversity, and on the other, the tendency to essentialise or crystallise the groups involved. When culture is understood as something fixed and immutable, there is a risk of reinforcing stereotypes and of locking subjects into monolithic identities (Bhabha 1994; Kaasila-Pakanen 2015). As shown in the works of Edward Said (1978) and Homi Bhabha (1994), this reductive conception largely stems from a colonial legacy in which the West reserved for itself the authority to describe and classify the “other” through essentialist categories that obscure its internal plurality. The postcolonial approach has highlighted how the West has historically produced discourses that portray other cultures as fundamentally “other,” assigning them fixed and timeless characteristics (Said 1978). At the same time, decolonial studies (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007) have drawn attention to the epistemic structures that continue to reproduce hierarchies, arguing that the mere official recognition of cultural differences, when rooted in a vision of “culture” as an untouchable core, in fact perpetuates a form of centralised power. This holds true even for certain forms of multiculturalism,

where attempts to protect minorities can lead to a static form of “culturalism” impermeable to hybridity (Parekh 1998; Phillips 2010). The very concept of culture, in its many political and theoretical articulations, has therefore become the object of a broad and layered critique that has emerged not only from postcolonial and decolonial thought, but also from traditions concerned with social justice, intersectionality, and feminist political theory. Despite its seemingly innocent semantic appearance, culture has become a privileged site in which social categories, epistemic hierarchies, identity narratives, and regimes of visibility have been deposited, often in naturalised forms, imposed on subjects who have been denied the power of self-representation. It is in this sense that cultural essentialism – the idea that there exist clearly definable cultures, internally coherent, transmitted linearly, and fully shared by all members of a group – has been at the centre of a long process of deconstruction, one that has shaped both theoretical debate and the practical development of multicultural policies (Kaasila-Pakanen 2015; Kymlicka 2014).

Among the voices that have most radically questioned this idea, Homi Bhabha articulated the concept of the “third space” precisely to challenge the presumed stability of cultural identities (Bhabha 1994, 2007). For Bhabha, cultures, far from being self-contained entities, represent discursive effects that emerge in spaces of encounter, translation and negotiation. Cultural identity is always a process, marked by contradictions, displacements and discontinuities, and never a given precondition. This view, which draws on the deeper insights of post-structuralist thought, has been taken up and expanded by scholars such as Dervin (Dervin & Machart 2015), who argue that many educational and institutional models based on “intercultural competence” still rely on an implicit idea of culture as a stable repertoire of values and behaviours. According to Dervin, this perspective ends up reproducing exactly what it claims to deconstruct: the rigidity of identity boundaries and the reduction of the other to a set of recognisable, classifiable, and manageable traits. This would represent, more than a theoretical error, a political operation that contributes to cementing presumed differences and disarming the transformative potential of contact.

In the debate on justice and recognition, Nancy Fraser pointed out that multicultural policies risk shifting from a redistributive paradigm to a purely “culturalist” one, in which the struggle against material inequalities is replaced by the symbolic valorisation of identities (Fraser 2001). The problem, according to Fraser, does not lie in recognition itself, but in the fact

that it is often enacted through reified models of identity that turn subjects into bearers of an original, coherent, and non-negotiable culture. This kind of recognition, Fraser argues, does not emancipate but consolidates the existing symbolic order, preventing subjects from redefining themselves in unpredictable ways, from multiplying their alliances, from breaking out of stereotypical attributions. The reflection of Seyla Benhabib also moves in this direction, as she has emphasised how the use of culture in inclusion policies often replaces listening with attribution, and dialogue with representation (Benhabib 2002). Benhabib insists that no group is culturally homogeneous, and that when culture becomes a political category, it tends to function as a mechanism of closure, silencing dissenting voices within the group itself. For both authors, the risk is not merely theoretical, but deeply practical: it legitimises the right of community elites to speak on behalf of all, reinforces internal patriarchal structures, and naturalises inequalities that thus go unnoticed, disguised as expressions of cultural loyalty. A similar critique, though from a different perspective, comes from Appiah, who has strongly opposed what he calls the “lie of identity,” that is, the idea that people act, feel and think according to their cultural belonging as if it were an original, complete and coherent fact. Appiah argues that every identity, including ethnic and racial ones, is largely constructed by external narratives, social expectations and political impositions. Cultural identity, in his view, is always a negotiation between what one receives and what one rejects, between attribution and self-definition. As a result, any attempt to “protect” it by freezing it into an essence, even in the name of respect, amounts to a form of epistemic violence. Respect, Appiah claims, must begin with the recognition of alterity as a process, not as a substance.

In the debate over the concept of culture that underpins multiculturalist policies, Brubaker (2002) introduced the notion of “groupism,” criticising the widespread tendency, both in social theory and in public policy, to treat ethnic, national or racial groups as unitary and substantial actors. Specifically, Brubaker does not deny the existence of some form of groups, but questions the way in which they are conceptualised, as if they had a collective will, their own interests, a stable and shared culture. What he proposes instead is a situated analysis of groupness, that is, the degree and the conditions under which a collective identity forms, is perceived, enacted, made visible or rendered invisible. This vision, taken up and developed by scholars such as Zapata-Barrero (2016, 2017) and Cattle (2013, 2016), has informed many of the interculturalist critiques of the multiculturalist

approach, accused of contributing to the political ethnicisation of migrant groups, that is, to their reduction to mere representatives of an origin, a tradition or a religion.

Modood, however, rejects this accusation, arguing that it is based on a caricature of his position and on a misunderstanding of what ethnicity and culture represent in the conceptualisation of groups from a multicultural perspective (Modood 2005, 2017). He proposes a form of anti-essentialism that neither dissolves groups into pure contingency nor reduces them to strategic fictions, but conceives of them as groupings, dynamic social realities shaped by practices, norms, affections and strategies, and formed over time through a continuous interaction between ascriptions and self-definitions. Unlike Brubaker's radical scepticism or Cattle's normative reluctance, Modood insists that groups exist not because they correspond to stable categories, but because they are lived and enacted as spaces of meaning, memory and resistance (Modood 2017). From his perspective, this does not entail assuming that groups are ontologically homogeneous and static but rather observing and analysing how collective identities are constituted through the interplay between external attributions and internal dynamics of recognition, elaboration and response. Ethnicity is never a mere external projection, nor an essence to be defended, but a historically situated configuration expressed through shared practices, perceptions, strategies and sentiments, taking on substance precisely when it is lived and narrated as such. It is in this direction that Modood, opposing both the accusation of cultural reification and the dissolution of collective belonging into a fluid and hyper-individualised rhetoric, proposes five dimensions of ethnic difference that escape both multiculturalist frameworks rooted in colonialist approaches of "Othering" and those that reduce identities to strategic fictions. The first, "cultural distinctiveness," does not correspond to the total and uniform adherence to a system of values or norms, but rather to the fact that certain symbolic references – such as religious practices, conceptions of family or gender roles – continue to represent, even when contested, a terrain of internal negotiation. It is not conformity, but the need to engage with these practices, to reinterpret or criticise them from within, that constitutes the distinctive element. The second dimension, "disproportionality," concerns the way in which certain material conditions – such as unemployment, overconcentration in specific sectors of the labour market or absence from others – end up shaping both the group's self-image and the way it is perceived from the outside. These disparities are not "cultural traits," but

social facts that, once rooted, produce symbolic effects and perceptions of otherness. The third, “strategy,” shows how minority groups do not passively submit to the constraints imposed by the context, but respond through forms of adaptation, refusal or innovation, ranging from entrepreneurship to activism, from cooperation to the construction of support networks. It is these shared, reiterated and recognised practices that contribute to the formation of collective consciousness – not the existence of a common essence. The fourth, “creativity,” highlights how minority cultures are often sites of production of new aesthetic, social or economic forms, which emerge in response to marginality and, once recognised or adopted by the majority, reveal the generative capacity of these experiences. Finally, “identity” refers to the affective and symbolic dimension of belonging: being part of an ethnic group may mean sharing a sense of dignity, pride and solidarity, developed through common histories of oppression, migration or resistance. These feelings do not derive from an immutable essence, but from an intersubjective recognition that strengthens identity without fixing it.

All of these dimensions, Modood emphasises, have no transcendental value and cannot be used for abstract typification: they are situated, contingent, empirically verifiable, and subject to transformation. They constitute what the author calls the “mode of being” of groups, as distinct from the “mode of oppression,” and represent not an identity abstraction, but the concrete expression of a collective existence. To believe, therefore, that multiculturalism is grounded in fixed, closed identities impermeable to hybridity would mean not only misrepresenting its theoretical framework, but also denying the complexity of how groups form, narrate, and transform themselves.

1.4 The issue of citizenship

Just as culture has long been treated as a form of substantial, attributed, and immutable belonging, citizenship in its modern configuration has also inherited the tendency to establish rigid boundaries between those who are included and those who remain outside. But just as culture, in its reified and hierarchical version, has been the object of theoretical and political deconstruction that has exposed its normative function, citizenship too must be interrogated not only as a legal status, but as a dispositif of visibility, recognition and legitimisation. The problem, therefore, does not lie solely in the formal conditions required to obtain citizenship, but also in the cultural,

moral and racial assumptions that, often implicitly, define its accessibility. Who is considered “ready” to become a citizen? Who has the right not only to reside, but to participate, to express themselves, to be represented? And in what way does the narrative of citizenship intertwine with the idea of a national culture to be preserved or defended?

Citizenship, as Gargiulo (2021) shows, emerges in a specific historical context: it is the outcome of a process of institutionalising state sovereignty that took shape between the Middle Ages and the modern era and found its first formal expression in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. It is at this turning point that a legal-political system was affirmed based on the principle of territorial authority – a model in which the state defines itself through the simultaneous control of a given space and of the populations inhabiting it. As Elden (2013) and Williams (2006) note, territorial sovereignty and the governance of subjects must not be thought of as separate processes, but as constitutive elements of the same logic: there is no power over bodies without control over space, and vice versa. The modern state, in its territorial and juridical configuration, is the fullest expression of this co-implication. Within this framework, borders should not be understood as mere lines of demarcation. They operate as mechanisms of selection: they establish who is authorised to enter, who may remain, and who must be excluded. Their functioning is governed by a legal framework that grants or denies the right to cross or to stay. For those who meet the established criteria, the border may function as a threshold of entry; for others, it becomes an impassable limit, marking an absence of recognition and of status. Within this mechanism, citizenship assumes a central regulatory role: it is the legal form through which belonging is established. Every individual, by definition, is tied to a state, and this bond determines a fundamental distinction between those recognised as part of the political community and those who, even if residing in the same space, remain excluded. This model was progressively affirmed, replacing the plurality of premodern hierarchical bonds with an exclusive identity based on belonging to a territory and a sovereign order. The result is a structure of legal inclusion consolidated through the right to citizenship. But, as the literature reminds us (Turner & Hamilton 1994; Costa 2005; Mindus 2014), citizenship has never been a purely legal matter. It combines formal and symbolic dispositifs: it defines the criteria for access, but also the modalities through which recognition and legitimisation are granted to those presumed to belong to the state. It is, in every respect, a political technology: a tool that does not merely establish status, but

organises inclusion, regulates exclusion, and constructs belonging (Brubaker 1992; Bosniak 2006). In this sense, it cannot be thought of as neutral, but as grounded in normative assumptions that are historically and politically determined (Gonzales & Sigona 2017).

In the lexicon of the social sciences, citizenship initially emerged as a concept linked to the transformation of the welfare state in the post-war period. It did not arise in relation to migration, but rather as a category useful for describing capitalism's capacity to reorganise itself and include growing portions of the population, guaranteeing formal – and in some cases substantial – equality to subjects who had previously been marginalised (Joppke 2022). Marshall's formulation (1950) represents the classical paradigm: citizenship as a set of civil, political and social rights, conceived as a means of compensating for the inequalities generated by the market. In the following years, however, this very structure became the terrain on which new claims were articulated – those advanced by groups who, despite residing permanently within the state, had been excluded from it. Citizenship thus shifted from a device for redistribution to a platform for demands for recognition. The large-scale migrations of the second half of the twentieth century, initially tied to decolonisation processes and temporary labour policies, and later increasingly shaped by family movements and asylum applications, had a profound impact on the function of citizenship. As Brubaker (1992) notes, it progressively lost its integrative capacity and assumed a selective function. No longer a system of rights for the members of the state community, it became an instrument for distinguishing who does and who does not belong to the body of the nation. In Weberian terms, citizenship became a mechanism of “social closure”: a way of regulating access to rights, oriented not towards inclusion but towards exclusion (Weber 1922). This transformation generates a tension that runs through the entire architecture of the concept: on the one hand, the universal principle of the “right to have rights” (Arendt 1948); on the other, a normative structure that, precisely in order to guarantee the integrity of citizenship, continues to produce exclusion. Citizenship, in this sense, is more than a legal category – it is an institution that defines the boundaries of recognition in practical terms. It operates in both the legal and the symbolic sphere. On the one hand, it regulates access to services, protections and rights through norms governing residence, labour, welfare and education. On the other, it structures discourses, representations and expectations related to national identity, social cohesion and the legitimacy of others' presence. But these

two dimensions do not always develop in synchrony. It is precisely in the asymmetry between formal belonging and actual recognition that tensions and ruptures emerge.

In this scenario, many Western states have progressively redefined citizenship as a reward rather than a right. Access to citizenship status is today often subject to the demonstration of merit, loyalty and the ability to produce value. Citizenship, as Houdt and colleagues have suggested (Houdt et al. 2011), takes on the traits of a “neoliberal communitarian” dispositif, in which belonging is conditional upon the individual’s responsibility to earn the right to belong by conforming to the values of the nation, conceived as a closed moral community. Within this logic, the individual is no longer simply a bearer of rights but is assessed on the basis of adherence to a predefined behavioural and moral model. Citizenship thus ceases to be an instrument of equality and becomes a selective threshold – fragile, negotiable and hierarchical. Joppke (2022) takes up and develops a now widespread interpretation, according to which citizenship today tends to take the form of a conditional recognition, subordinated to the subject's ability to prove their worth, productivity and level of integration. From this perspective, citizenship has ceased to be recognised as an abstract right or the result of formal membership, but must be ‘earned’ by demonstrating a standard of behaviour that meets the criteria of individual responsibility and contribution to the community. This concept, defined by the author himself as earned citizenship, clearly reveals its neoliberal nature, because it is conditioned by the capacity of individuals to be responsible for themselves, to achieve specific objectives and to contribute in various ways to the interests of the dominant group (Joppke 2022).

The first domain in which this logic explicitly manifests itself is that of naturalisation. In this context, acquiring citizenship no longer equates to simply meeting formal requirements, but rather to demonstrating a level of competence and merit that is higher than what is required for native citizens. As Badenhop (2017) observes, the aspiring citizen is requested to reach increasingly higher evaluation thresholds, having to demonstrate their suitability through outstanding performance, as if they had to embody the ideal type of the ‘super-citizen’. Citizenship, from a legal condition, is thus transformed into a symbolic prize, granted as recognition of individual merit rather than in the name of a principle of equality. Ahmad (2017) effectively summarises this transformation: earned citizenship is a reward for certain achievements, not a status of belonging.

When it comes to contemporary migration, this reconfiguration takes on an emblematic meaning. Paradoxically, just as citizenship loses material value (Somers 2008), it is represented as a symbolic asset to be elevated, protected and conquered. The British case, among the first to adopt the paradigm of earned citizenship, is exemplary in this sense. Already in 2008, the Home Office defined earned citizenship as ‘the expectation that newcomers will earn the right to stay by learning English, paying taxes, respecting the law and contributing to the community’ (Home Office 2008, p. 4). This establishes a hierarchy between citizens ‘by right’ and citizens ‘who owe something in return’, reinforcing the idea of one-way integration: not a relational process, but a path of adaptation in which it is up to the immigrant to prove that they deserve to belong by adhering to the values and codes of the nation.

This rhetoric, which combines moral expectations and performative evaluation criteria, highlights how neoliberalism and nationalism are not at all antithetical, but can exist as co-constitutive elements (Gargiulo 2017). This is what Joppke himself suggests (2021), speaking of ‘neoliberal nationalism’: a formula that describes the fusion of market logic and identity rhetoric in the redefinition of citizenship as a meritocratic contract. In Joppke's view, the distinctive feature of this configuration, however, is that it does not only apply to immigrants. Although the literature has often focused on the role of earned citizenship in naturalisation processes, this notion can also be interpreted as a reflection of a broader transformation in post-welfare social policies. In this context, the citizen, whether native or foreign, is increasingly conceived as a worker-citizen (Anderson 2015), a subject whose value depends on their ability to generate productivity and social utility. The logic of citizenship is no longer oriented towards decommodification, as in the Marshallian model, but rather towards its inversion: the citizen as an entrepreneurial individual, evaluated according to their performance. As Joppke (2022) summarises, true equity in this way is achieved in the balance between what is given and what is received.

According to this interpretation of the role of the mechanism of selection and exclusion through citizenship in a neoliberal key, the latter would tend to be open to excluding all those who cannot or do not want to meet the imposed criteria of productivity and self-responsibility. In this sense, neoliberal nationalism would operate a selection no longer based on ethno-national origin, but on the individual's ability to contribute to the interests, especially economic, of the receiving society. Citizenship is thus

defined as a moral-economic distinction between those who are deemed worthy of inclusion and those who, instead, are placed on the margins, thus in reality more biased towards the liberal than the national component of the binomial.

However, it is interesting to question the applicability of this theoretical framework in specific national contexts, where citizenship seems to be structured according to slightly different logics. The Italian case, in particular, potentially reveals a significant deviation from this framework. In recent years, the public and political debate on citizenship, rather than on naturalisation, has focused mainly on second generations, giving rise to a polarisation that has developed along lines quite distinct from those traced by the economic-meritocratic paradigm. The children of immigrants born and raised in Italy find themselves in an ambiguous position: although they are an integral part of the social fabric, they remain excluded from legal recognition until they come of age and must face an often complex and lengthy process. In this situation, the logic of earned citizenship struggles to find application. Their legal status precedes any assessment of their integration into the labour market or individual productivity: they cannot 'earn' citizenship through proof of an economic contribution, because the lack of recognition precedes any possibility of demonstrating it. The Italian debate still seems to be rather anchored to a concept of citizenship as a nationalist instrument of exclusion rather than as a form of recognition, and demonstrates how the paradigm of neoliberal nationalism, far from being universal, must be analysed in its local historical and political context. Citizenship regimes, beyond the rhetoric of openness or closure, remain deeply tied to the institutional heritage and national grammar that structure the logic of belonging. In this sense, talking about citizenship today means questioning not only the relationship between state and individual, but also the ways in which the right to be part of a political community is constructed and denied. The Italian citizenship system is based on a principle of transmission by descent, *ius sanguinis*, which historically has defined the criteria for belonging to the national community by excluding those born on Italian territory, or *ius soli*, of foreign parents, unless they meet specific and restrictive requirements. This model, inherited from a historical approach that privileged the genealogical continuity of the nation over a territorial conception of belonging, now produces highly selective access to citizenship for the children of migrants. According to current legislation, they can obtain the recognition of citizenship if they reside legally in Italy until their 18th

birthday, and only if they explicitly request it by their 19th birthday. In addition to this, there is a complex apparatus of administrative constraints, which further limits the possibility for foreigners to acquire citizenship. In the case of non-EU citizens, for example, it is necessary to prove at least ten years of continuous legal residence in order to apply for Italian citizenship (Gargiulo, 2021). However, this formal condition clashes with restrictive practices adopted at the local level: several Italian municipalities have introduced bureaucratic hurdles not provided for by law, which make it difficult for migrants to gain access to civil registration, leading to a situation of *de facto* exclusion from fundamental rights. The consequence is a differential citizenship, in which the possibility of accessing essential services and participating fully in political life depends not only on national legislation, but also on arbitrary administrative practices that, *de facto*, limit the recognition of social belonging (Gargiulo, 2021).

The current legislation of reference is Law No. 91 of 1992, which states that who is born of an Italian father or mother is a citizen by birth (Chamber of Deputies). This same law provides, as said, for the possibility of naturalisation for foreigners only after ten years of continuous residence – reduced to four for citizens of the European Union – and allows those born in Italy of foreign parents to become citizens only upon reaching the legal age, provided they have lived in Italy continuously since birth. This regulatory system, drawn up at a time when Italy was not yet considered a country of structural immigration, has gradually proved inadequate with respect to the demographic and social reality of a country that is now home to a growing number of second generations without legal recognition.

Since the 2010s, numerous reform proposals have emerged to adapt legislation to Italy's transformation into a consolidated immigration society. During the 17th Legislature (2013-2018), the Chamber of Deputies approved a bill (October 2015) that introduced a model of tempered *ius soli* and *ius culturae*, with the aim of facilitating the acquisition of citizenship for foreign minors born or raised in Italy (Chamber of Deputies). According to this proposal, the tempered *ius soli* would have granted automatic citizenship to children born in Italy to at least one parent with an EU long-term resident permit, while the *ius culturae* would have granted citizenship to minors who arrived in Italy before the age of 12 and had completed at least a five-year school cycle (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies). However, this reform, despite a favourable vote in the Chamber of Deputies, was never finally

approved: the bill stalled in the Senate in 2017, blocked by political divisions and the early end of the legislature.

This was not the only parliamentary initiative on the subject. Reform proposals had already been made in the previous parliamentary term (2008-2013), including the reduction of the residence period required for naturalisation from ten to five years and the introduction of linguistic and social integration criteria as evaluation parameters for access to citizenship (Chamber of Deputies). However, none of these proposals led to structural regulatory change. This continuing failure to reform citizenship legislation highlights a contradiction: on the one hand, there is widespread recognition of the need to adapt the rules to the reality of a society that now includes millions of people born or raised in Italy by foreign parents; on the other, citizenship continues to be treated as a politically divisive issue, subject to cycles of advancement and stalemate without ever reaching a final resolution.

Despite the absence of an organic reform of citizenship, several legislative interventions have been introduced in recent years that have changed the regulatory framework, tightening the conditions for access to citizenship and reinforcing the link between legal membership and integration criteria. One of the most significant measures in this direction was the 2009 Security Package (Law 94/2009), approved in a political context characterised by a strong tightening of migration policies. In addition to introducing new security and immigration control measures, this law laid the foundations for the Integration Agreement, a mechanism that links the granting of residence permits and citizenship to the foreigner's demonstration of a path to integration, an aspect that will be explored further below. Subsequently, between 2010 and 2018, Law 91/1992 underwent a number of procedural amendments, culminating in Decree Law 113/2018 (converted into Law 132/2018), known as the first Security Decree introduced by then Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini. The new measure has tightened the criteria for obtaining citizenship, modifying the time frames and conditions for naturalisation. Among the most significant changes there is, on the one hand, the extension of the maximum term for concluding the procedures for citizenship by residence or marriage from 24 to 48 months, applied retroactively also to procedures already in progress. However, on the other hand, the decree has increased the financial contribution required for the submission of the citizenship application, raising it from 200 to 250 euros, and has introduced a new language requirement: starting from December

2018, those applying for citizenship by marriage or residence must certify a language proficiency in Italian of at least level B1 of the CEFR, demonstrable through language certificates or diplomas issued by accredited Italian institutions, recognised by the Ministry. Another significant change introduced by the Security Decree concerns the principle of tacit consent in the context of citizenship by marriage. Previously, if the administration did not respond within two years of the request, citizenship was automatically granted. With the 2018 reform, this automatism has been lifted, allowing the authorities to reject citizenship applications even after the deadline (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Furthermore, the decree introduced the possibility of revoking Italian citizenship in the event of a final conviction for crimes related to terrorism, a measure that has sparked widespread debate on its compatibility with the principle of non-discrimination between citizens by birth and naturalised citizens.

In 2020, the Conte II government made some changes to the provisions contained in the Security Decrees, mainly intervening on the humanitarian protection system for asylum seekers and restoring the possibility of civil registration for this category of migrants. However, the requirements for citizenship were not changed: the minimum period of residence required for naturalisation remained fixed at ten years, and the waiting period for the conclusion of citizenship procedures continues to be four years. At the same time, between 2021 and 2022, the bill known as *ius scholae*, the aforementioned reform that would have introduced a new criterion for access to citizenship for foreign minors who had grown up in Italy, returned to Parliament. This proposal envisaged granting citizenship to minors who arrived in Italy before the age of 12, provided they had completed at least a five-year school cycle. However, even this attempt at reform did not find sufficient political consensus to be approved.

Taking a step back and returning to the Integration Agreement mentioned above, it can be observed how, starting in the 2010s, Italy has progressively added instruments inspired by the concept of civic integration to its traditional migration policies, taking up a model already adopted in various European countries. The principle of civic integration is based on the idea that a foreigner's stay should be subordinated to the achievement of specific integration objectives, measured through linguistic, cultural and civic criteria. In this scheme, the immigrant is not simply a resident, but a subject called upon to demonstrate his or her active commitment to integration, acquiring basic knowledge about the host society and being

subject to a logic of conditionality that provides for sanctions on their legal status in the event of non-compliance (Gargiulo 2017; 2021). According to Gargiulo (2017) and data provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the main civic integration instrument in Italy is the Integration Agreement for Foreigners (*Accordo di Integrazione per lo straniero*), established by the Presidential Decree 179/2011 in implementation of Law 94/2009. Since March 2012, every immigrant over the age of sixteen who enters Italy and applies for a residence permit of at least one year is required to sign this agreement. The system provides for a two-year points-based pact (extendable by a further year), in which 16 initial credits are awarded upon signing, while the immigrant undertakes to achieve at least 30 credits within two years through integration activities. Credits are accumulated mainly through the achievement of specific objectives, including learning the Italian language and participating in civic education courses. However, credits may also be deducted in the event of serious violations, such as criminal convictions or significant administrative sanctions. The state organises free Italian language, civic education and career guidance courses, recognising additional credits for qualifications obtained, children's school attendance, enrolment in the National Health Service and other indicators of good integration. The explicit objective is to bring the immigrant to a minimum level of integration, corresponding at least to A2 knowledge of the Italian language and a sufficient understanding of civic principles and the functioning of Italian institutions. If at the end of two years the applicant has not reached the required 30 credits, the agreement may be extended for a further year. However, if the credits are not reached by the final deadline, or if the initial score is reset due to violations, the mechanism provides for the revocation of the residence permit and expulsion from Italian territory. In this logic, the Integration Agreement functions as a sort of point-based integration licence: it incentivises virtuous behaviour such as studying the language and adhering to constitutional values, while penalising non-compliance with the loss of legal status. However, some vulnerable categories-such as unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, international protection holders and family members of EU citizens-are exempted from the obligation to sign the agreement (Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The 2012 Integration Agreement thus represents the main national civic integration instrument, although its effectiveness is a matter of debate. On the one hand, it institutionalised a compulsory integration path involving thousands of new immigrants,

offering them basic training on language, rights and duties. This signals a clear political will to regulate integration from the first steps of entry into Italy. On the other hand, however, several scholars and associations point to significant critical issues. In fact, not all immigrants have effective access to courses and the necessary means to accumulate credits: in some territories the training offer is insufficient, while many full-time workers find it difficult to reconcile course attendance with working hours (see for example Zorzella 2011; Cuttitta 2013; Gargiulo 2017). Another criticism concerns the system's sanctioning logic, which provides for expulsion in case of "failure". Although this rule is infrequently applied, it has a strong symbolic value, reinforcing the idea of a unidirectional and conditional integration, in which the entire burden of integration falls on the individual immigrant, without recognising the role of structural barriers that hinder the process. As Gargiulo (2021) notes, the civic integration model is based on the individual empowerment of the immigrant, without systematically addressing discrimination, socio-economic difficulties and the lack of real opportunities for participation. One of the most critical elements, in addition to the inequality of claims between citizens and aspiring citizens, remains the lack of political inclusion of immigrants, an aspect that partially nullifies the very principle of civic integration. In Italy, in fact, citizenship continues to be difficult to access and the right to vote for foreigners is not recognised even at the local level. This means that, despite being called upon to fulfil obligations and integration paths, immigrants remain excluded from decision-making processes that regulate their living conditions (Carbone 2020; Gargiulo 2021; Mancini 2021). The second generation of migrants are among the groups most affected by the restrictions imposed by the Italian citizenship system. Despite being born and raised in Italy, experiencing a socialisation process indistinguishable from that of their peers with Italian citizenship, these young people do not see their legal status automatically recognised. At the age of 18, they have to go through an often long and complex bureaucratic process to obtain citizenship, undergoing conditions that do not apply to their peers born of Italian parents (Gargiulo 2017; 2021).

Second-generation migrants find themselves at the centre of one of the most obvious contradictions in the Italian citizenship system. Although they were born and grew up in Italy, sharing schooling, social networks and cultural references with their Italian citizen peers, their legal recognition is not automatic. On the contrary, they are forced to go through a complex bureaucratic process with strict requirements in order to obtain citizenship

once they reach the age of majority (Gargiulo, 2021). This exclusion is not limited to an administrative dimension, but has profound consequences on the identity construction and social participation of these young people. Second generations find themselves in an ambivalent condition: immersed in a typically Italian socialisation, but at the same time perceived as other by the state and society because of their precarious legal status. This dissonance between lived belonging and legal recognition fuels a sense of exclusion and lack of legitimacy, with effects on civic participation and the perception of one's role in the national community (Gargiulo, 2021).

At this point in the analysis of the citizenship, it is evident how the criterion of taking on the productive individual, which Joppke (2022) identifies as a pivotal logic of earned citizenship, is hardly applicable to those who, due to their minor age, cannot yet be assessed on the basis of their economic autonomy. This clearly differentiates the condition of second generations from that of first immigrants, who are subject to naturalisation paths based on requirements we have seen such as uninterrupted residence for ten years and other conditions that express a neoliberal logic of merit and economic contribution. In this sense, both earned citizenship and civic integration as described by Gargiulo (2017, 2021) are presented as instruments that subordinate access to citizenship to the individual's ability to integrate productively into society, demonstrating the prevalence of neoliberal logics over more strictly nationalist identity-based ones. However, in the case of second generations, this logic cannot be obviously applied before they reach the legal age. It could be hypothesised, then, that the failure to anticipate access to citizenship for second generations - i.e. maintaining the age of majority as the minimum criterion - is not the result of simple legislative inertia, but rather responds to a precise strategy. In other words, the transition from a regime based on *ius sanguinis* to a tempered *ius soli* could be delayed precisely to allow these young people, once they reach the age of majority, to demonstrate their commitment to taking on the burdens of citizenship. In this scenario, obtaining citizenship would become a process conditional not only on residence in Italy, but also on the ability to meet criteria of autonomy, productivity and economic empowerment. Two elements, however, suggest that the situation is more complex than this, and that in Italy the overlap between apparently contrasting forces such as nationalism and neoliberalism seems to be much more inclined in favour of the identitarian nationalist side. On the one hand, the simple fact of reaching adulthood, even if in theory associated with the guarantee that a prolonged

stay in the age of development on Italian soil would lead to the assimilation of its culture and the highest possible degree of inculturation, doesn't guarantee the aforementioned willingness to take on economic and productive commitments. Looking at the data on youth employment and NEETs is a good indicator of the fact that this condition also affects Italian citizens "from birth" (on this, see ISTAT 2024 for Italian data and Eurostat 2023 for a European overview). If the problem was really related to the individual's ability to contribute economically to society, one could hypothesise that the entire system of access to citizenship would be reformulated to take into account the overall socio-economic condition of applicants, regardless of their migratory background. But this doesn't seem to be the case. Secondly, while in Italy the public debate on citizenship for first-generation immigrants is almost non-existent, despite the restrictive preconditions already discussed, the issue of citizenship for second-generation immigrants is at the centre of a very heated political debate revolving around the opportunity to include in the body of the nation those who do not meet the homogenising, and hereditary, criteria of skin colour, religion and culture. This suggests that the main obstacle is not so much adherence to a neo-liberal model of merit and economic contribution, but rather a deeper resistance related to the cultural and identity criteria that define nationhood. The debate around citizenship for second generations does not revolve around their ability to enter the labour market or contribute to society in economic terms, but focuses on the question of who can be considered Italian beyond residence and socialisation in the national context. In essence, the debate, outside of academia or legislative technical-scientific contexts, is indeed anchored on the idea of 'deserving' citizenship, but more on the assumption of inculturating assimilation and the highest possible degree of abandonment of one's specific cultural heritage. This scenario shows how, in the Italian context, citizenship remains a profoundly political device, more tied to strategies of exclusion than to real mechanisms of inclusion. The overlap between neo-liberalism and nationalism does not eliminate identity logics, but redefines them, integrating them into a system in which citizenship becomes a reward conditional on both productivity and cultural assimilation.

This tension between inclusion and exclusion is neither an isolated phenomenon nor exclusive to the Italian context. Studies on citizenship in the global south have questioned the relevance of Western definitions of citizenship, highlighting how they are often inadequate to describe the

political realities of former colonies and countries characterised by strong post-colonial stratification (Mamdani, 1995; 1996; Kabeer, 2002; Gaventa, 2002; Cornwall, 2002). Mahmood Mamdani (1996), in particular, analysed the relationship between state and civil society in the former colonies, showing how, unlike modern Western societies, the distinction between state and civil society was deeply blurred in the territories administered through indirect colonialism. In this scheme, the colonial state was characterised by a bifurcated structure that established a dual relationship with society: on the one hand, there were the citizens, a restricted category that included European settlers and assimilated indigenous elites; on the other hand, the vast majority of the population was classified as subjects, excluded from access to political rights and governed through local administrations subordinated to colonial control. The legacy of this political organisation has had long-term consequences in the definition of citizenship, with effects that are also reflected in contemporary debates on its inclusiveness. Criticism of this narrow conception has led to a reconceptualisation of citizenship, shifting the focus from the state to the subjects themselves and favouring a more pluralist model (Young, 1990). Consequently, new theories of citizenship have emerged that have broadened its definition beyond mere legal status, introducing concepts such as participatory and inclusive citizenship (Gaventa, 2002; Kabeer, 2002), active citizenship (Kearns, 1995; Lister, 1997) and insurgent citizenship (Holston, 1998). These theories offer an alternative to the state-centric conception of citizenship, emphasising social practices and forms of participation that emerge from below. In this perspective, citizenship does not end with formal rights and duties established by the state, but is also articulated through strategies of resistance, claim and social mobilisation. As Cornwall (2002) notes, citizenship is not limited to participation in the institutional spaces provided by the state -those it defines as invited spaces-but also extends to forms of autonomous action through which individuals create their own opportunities and define the terms of their political participation. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the condition of second generations in Italy, whose legal status puts them in a situation of continuous negotiation of their belonging. Since they are not automatically recognised as citizens, they could find themselves forced to actively claim their place in society, through mobilisations, political demands and everyday citizenship practices that go beyond mere legal recognition. Their experience shows how citizenship is not only a state concession, but also a social process that is constructed

through participation and contestation of the very criteria that determine belonging.

1.5 City and diversity

After having analysed the normative transformations and the academic debate around the notions of integration and citizenship, it is necessary to return to the urban dimension, where diversity is realised in forms of aggregation, visibility and permanence in space. Western cities are configured as laboratories where the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are defined through housing policies, segregation dynamics and models of coexistence between different social and ethnic groups. The issue of the spatial concentration of diversity does not only concern the distribution of the migrant population, but involves the relationship between majority and minorities, processes of social interaction and the construction of new, often conflicting forms of belonging.

Cities have always been places where diversity meets and clashes, and this characteristic is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Saitta (2020) points out that we are in a *key* urban moment, in which the increasing heterogeneity of metropolitan areas is redefining the way in which urban space is experienced. In his analysis, he points out that global urbanisation is intensifying cultural and social differences, and that metropolitan diversity is not simply a mosaic of ethnic groups, but is shaped by historical, economic and geopolitical factors. The city, notes Mandanipour (2014), has always been the place where differences meet, interact and, in some cases, collide. If diversity is a structural condition of the city, its management is never neutral. According to Irazábal (2011), it is becoming a '*determinant marker*', an increasingly visible variable in the organisation of urban space. However, the encounter with diversity does not necessarily generate inclusion or cohesion: Saitta (2020) points out how it can produce anxiety and distrust, especially in a context marked by economic crises and political changes. Despite the rhetoric of the city as a place of mixing and innovation, today we are witnessing a progressive weakening of its capacity to generate social cohesion, a phenomenon linked to the sharpening of economic inequalities and the growing polarisation between social groups.

This fragmentation manifests itself in urban space in concrete ways: the concentration of wealth and poverty follows well-defined spatial logics, translating into unequal access to public spaces, services and infrastructure.

The redevelopment of historically marginalised areas, far from fostering real integration, often produces a silent expulsion of the less affluent populations, who are progressively pushed to the margins of the city. It is a process in which dislocation is not only material, but also symbolic: political and media narratives contribute to building an urban imaginary in which some presences are normalised, while others are perceived as alien, if not openly threatening. Behind these phenomena lie precise economic and political choices. Harvey (2012) points out how neoliberalism has transformed urbanisation into a mechanism of capital accumulation and inequality reproduction. The contemporary city is no longer only a space of opportunity, but also a device of exclusion, in which the value of citizenship and residence is measured on the basis of the capacity for consumption and access to resources. Current models of urban planning and spatial design seem anything but conducive to diversity, both because of their rootedness in conceptual traditions related to the Global North and the West, and because of their limited historical perspective. Most official theories of urban planning have their roots in the 19th century, or at best the Renaissance, thus ignoring other traditions of urbanism that developed in non-Western contexts (Saitta 2020). This narrow view has resulted in a planning paradigm that is characterised by an essentially monocultural bias, in which urban forms, architectural codes and regulations reflect the norms and values of Western majorities, without taking into account the needs of minority and subordinate groups. As Brenner (2009) notes, this approach is driven by instrumental, scientific-technical and market-oriented knowledge, thus being insensitive to diversity and generating exclusionary effects. The imposition of this model has given rise to what Lipsitz (2011) calls *white spatial imaginary*, an urban vision that reinforces spatial segregation and reproduces an idea of the city based on exclusive cultural criteria. The risk is that the debate on urban diversity remains confined to an abstract celebration of multiculturalism, while in practice urban policies continue to exclude those who do not fit the dominant parameters. However, there are alternative proposals that seek to overcome this impasse, including Richard Sennett's (2018) vision, which takes up the *open city* concept developed by Jane Jacobs. The idea of the open city implies an intellectual and aesthetic disposition to welcome difference, a cosmopolitan perspective that values pluralism and promotes forms of coexistence based on tolerance and respect for other cultures (Hannerz 1996; Noble 2013; Werbner 2014).

This perspective is related to a broader concept of *intercultural urbanism*, understood as an urban design and planning practice that takes into account the social impact of the built environment. According to Saitta (2020), decisions about the conformation of housing, parks and public spaces are never neutral, but incorporate distinct cultural and political visions. Urban interculturalism is thus not limited to an administrative management of diversity, nor can it be reduced to mere legislative reforms of citizenship; rather, it implies the active construction of new forms of coexistence and belonging, a long and complex process in which fears and anxieties must be acknowledged and addressed, rather than simply dismissed (Sandercock 2003). Central to this intercultural perspective are two fundamental rights: the right to difference and the right to the city. The former guarantees the recognition of the specific urban needs of minorities and subordinate groups, while the latter, echoing the reflections of Henri Lefebvre (1996), claims the presence in public space, equal participation in collective life and the possibility of transforming oneself through the transformation of the city (Harvey, 2008). Sandercock (2003) proposes a new model of *urban imagination*, which places at the centre not ethnic-cultural identity, but the construction of an inclusive political community. According to this perspective, the city is not only the place where diversity manifests itself, but also the place where it can be negotiated, reconfigured and valorised as a constitutive element of society.

The concept of community has always had multiple and often contradictory meanings. Harvey (1997) points out how it is evoked by very different social groups, from the marginalised who seek spaces of protection and belonging, to the struggling working classes, to the more affluent segments of society who see the community as a model of orderly and civilised urban development, made up of pedestrian spaces, open-air cafes and neighbourhoods with a homogenous aesthetic character. However, this apparently harmonious vision of community conceals a repressive dimension: from the earliest stages of industrial urbanisation, the rhetoric of community has been used to counter social disorder, to prevent class conflict and to stem the risk of riots. The community, therefore, is not only a place of connection and solidarity, but also a device of social control. Harvey highlights how it always defines itself in opposition to another, establishing clear boundaries that separate those who belong to it from those who are excluded. The construction of the community takes place through signs of exclusion, which can be symbolic – through language, cultural codes,

everyday practices – or material, with architectural barriers, regulations and urban planning devices that physically delimit space. The desire for community, Harvey argues, can easily degenerate into racism, ethnic chauvinism and class devaluation, because the positive definition of one group often passes through the devaluation of the other.

This dynamic has direct consequences on the shape of the city. The regulation of urban space has always been driven by a logic of selection and filtering, and contemporary urban planning is no exception. As Harvey observes, the city is increasingly organised to exclude what is considered deviant, dangerous or simply out of place. The result is an environment in which everything that makes the city unpredictable, stimulating and open to encounter is systematically regulated or eliminated. Public space, which should be a place of productive interaction and conflict, is transformed into a sterilised environment where diversity is only allowed within rigid and predefined parameters. The problem, therefore, is not just the community itself, but its political and economic function. While the idea of community has long been an antidote to social disorder, today it is used as a justification for exclusionary urban policies, which aim to build homogeneous and easily controlled neighbourhoods. The paradox is that what makes cities fascinating—the unexpected, the contrast, the interaction with the unknown—is gradually being eliminated in the name of an order that claims to be inclusive, but in fact serves to protect certain social groups at the expense of others.

In this perspective, community stops being a simple space of belonging and turns into a mechanism that regulates who can be visible and who must be pushed to the margins. The question is not whether the community is good or bad, but rather who has the power to define it, who sets its boundaries and who is excluded from its narrative. Going into the 'compatibility' of cultures perceived as distant in the local body of the majority 'community', therefore, as Sandercock (2003) suggests, a *partisan* approach is required, which goes beyond the idea of cultures as monolithic and clearly defined entities. Culture is neither a uniform block nor something universally shared, but rather a set of practices, symbols and meanings that may vary within the same group. Similarly, community does not coincide with neighbourhood, and cultural identities are not fixed, but change over time and space, influenced by dynamics of interaction and belonging. For a more adequate understanding of urban phenomena, city theory must therefore incorporate this fluid view of culture and identities. As Sandercock

(1998) notes, '*the urban experiences of new migrants*' redefine the conditions of belonging and transform urban space. Approaching the issue of the cohesive and visible presence of non-majority groups in western cities, we can identify a form of urbanism that differs from traditional planning practices. Suzi Hall proposes an interpretation of migrant urbanism that is not based on *top-down* logic, but develops as an emergent phenomenon, born out of the daily interaction between residents. This approach, which Saitta (2020) calls *pragmatic* and *non-universalising*, invites a shift in focus from institutional policies to the transformative capacity of ordinary practices in urban space.

Hall's (2015) contribution broadens the perspective on *ordinary cities* (Robinson 2006), exploring how *migrant urbanisms* are not just expressions of adaptation, but real processes of reorganisation of urban space, based on movement, mixing and exchange. The analysis thus moves beyond the simple encounter between racial and ethnic differences to question the capacity of everyday practices to influence political discourse and power structures. The economic and social exchange that takes place in the streets is not primarily ideological, but practical: migrants do not open businesses to *make multiculturalism*, but, in building spaces of work and exchange, they inevitably generate interactions and forms of social cohesion (Hall 2012, 2015). This perspective is set in a context marked by structural inequalities, which make the migrant experience inseparable from the dynamics of urban resistance and creativity. In particular, Hall contrasts the dominant narrative on migration, which in the UK is often portrayed as a *threat to* national integrity, with a reading that instead recognises the active role of migrants in shaping urban space and city policies. *Migrant urbanism* thus becomes a participatory practice of redefining the city, in which diversity and innovation intertwine in unpredictable ways.

The focus then shifts to two key aspects: on the one hand, the capacity of migration to *animate* the city through movements, mixing and exchanges that continuously modify urban space; on the other, the overcoming of a sociology of encounter understood as superficial interaction between strangers, in favour of a *sociology of reconfiguration*, in which the social becomes an integral part of the political. The central question is whether migration and urban multiculturalism can be understood not as *external forces* destabilising the nation-state, but as processes of social and political transformation emerging within cities, redefining their forms of belonging and participation.

1.6 Spatial concentration, or the difference between urban mosaic and ethnic segregation

Let's now try to understand on what basis the main theoretical discussions on neighbourhoods with a significant migrant presence are based, both in cases where the non-majority population reaches a demographic threshold of over 20-25% of total residents (Briata 2012), and when, despite remaining numerically smaller, they begin to be perceived and recognised as ethnic neighbourhoods at the city level. The distinction between actual spatial concentration and discursive construction of the ethnic neighbourhood assumes particular relevance in the Italian context, where levels of residential segregation are relatively low (Costarelli & Mugnano 2017; Benassi et al. 2022). This aspect, however, has not prevented the presence of immigrants in Italy from being frequently narrated in terms of conflict and tension, both locally and nationally (Mingione 2009), contributing to a problematic construction of urban diversity. The representation of the migrant population as an element of alteration of the urban order is linked, on the one hand, to a rhetoric that emphasises the risk of social fragmentation, and on the other to regulatory practices that reinforce the perception of a difference that would be difficult to integrate. The excess of normativity in the management of public space has played a key role in the production of these stereotypical images (Cancellieri & Ostanel 2015), in which the migrant presence is framed as potentially *inappropriate* with respect to the functions assigned to the city. Consequently, what is observed in Italian cities is a constant competition between social groups for the production and appropriation of public space, both in its material and symbolic dimensions (Brighenti 2012; Scandurra 2012).

Against this backdrop, local administrations have not distinguished themselves as particularly oriented towards promoting urban diversity, nor have they implemented strategies capable of recognising the multiple practices that define the experience of the city. On the contrary, the regulation of access to space and the imposition of rigid rules on the use of collective spaces have often accentuated the separation between populations perceived as *indigenous* and groups labelled as *outsiders*. This has contributed to consolidating a model of urban management in which the migration issue is addressed more as a problem to be contained than as a structural reality with which the city is confronted. Already in the studies of Wirth (1964) and in the first analyses of urban issues conducted by the Chicago School up to the Manchester School, as well as in the works of Simmel (1971), a recurring

concern emerged: the peculiar associative structure of the city, as opposed to that of rural centres, was seen as an element capable of generating fragmentation and isolation among its inhabitants. While anonymity and dispersion offered possibilities for autonomy and mobility, they could also lead to self-enclosure and incommunicability between distinct socio-economic and national groups, as well as within groups with greater cohesion. Already in the early decades of the 20th century, therefore, these rhetorics and concerns were central to the academic debate, signalling a reality that was far from homogeneous, and most of all depicting a urban landscape that appears far from being cohesive and harmonious.

Although smaller in quantitative terms than today's urban transformations, such studies were already recording a growing *difference in* cities, also on an ethnic-national basis. As Robinson (2006) points out in her work on the decolonisation of urban studies, in 1995 Friedman had already highlighted how so-called "Third World" cities were starting to resemble the "First World" cities. At the same time, the cities defined as world cities, from world city theory to Wallerstein's world-system theory, appeared more and more similar to the cities of the global South, precisely because of the increasing presence of heterogeneous groups and the development of semi-peripheries. These perspectives show how urban societies have historically been marked by processes of mixing, disproving the idea of an alleged homogeneity that is now often invoked as a normative parameter in policies for managing non-majority populations. Such policies, based on erroneous assumptions, fail to recognise the historicity of urban diversity, even when they present themselves in good faith in the form of discourses on the cohesion, balance, integration or social ascendancy of minority groups perceived as too cohesive.

It should also be noted that similar assumptions and concerns have been invoked with less emphasis and a much smaller audience when it comes to addressing the spatial concentration of disadvantaged groups belonging to the national majority. Studies on displacement and evictions related to slums or informal housing settlements, brought about by the development of modern states and their capitals, show how institutions have often promoted processes of segregation rather than social reshuffling. In Rome, for example, the desire to break up a heterogeneous socio-urban fabric that was historically mixed in the centre did not prevent the creation of *borghettos* or *borgate*, veritable islands of homogeneous discomfort located on the outskirts of the city. Later on, the same dynamic occurred with the formation

of ghettos through the realisation of entire neighbourhoods built exclusively for public housing, destined to the inhabitants of the slums of the city centre, without there being the same concern about social fragmentation that is raised today for neighbourhoods with a strong migrant presence. A similar phenomenon has been reproduced in the processes of touristisation and gentrification, which increasingly intensify the polarisation between areas of high income and areas of growing housing precarity (on this, see for example Ferrarotti 1970; Berdini 2008, 2010; Cellamare 2008). This apparent discrepancy reveals a key aspect: the call for social cohesion through the reshuffling of differences seems today to be almost exclusively concerned with somatic, cultural, religious and identity differences, perceived as destabilising elements of a supposed national homogeneity. In contrast, economic and social inequalities are often normalised and accepted as an integral part of the urban structure. Integration policies, while presenting themselves as tools to ensure social balance, tend to treat the migrant question as a problem to be managed, without considering the historical continuity of segregation and marginalisation processes.

Even in urban dynamics and settlement patterns, the functionalist paradigm of integration continues to recur, identifying the alleged deficiencies of minority groups as the causes of non-integration. This reading manifests itself, for instance, in arguments that the presence of ethnic enclaves fuels forms of social exclusion, a culture of poverty or parochial ethnic ties that hinder the full development of communities (Casey 2016; Portes & Landolt 1996). Such interpretations are often accompanied by the idea that particular cultural or religious practices perpetuate backward patterns, constituting an obstacle to so-called successful integration (Korteweg 2017). The implication is that social belonging and full recognition in the public sphere depend on the abandonment of cultural elements deemed irreconcilable with the dominant pattern.

At the intersection of citizenship, urban diversity and the spatial concentration of difference is the concept of cohesion, which becomes the fulcrum through which the debate on integration and the possibility of constructing forms of shared belonging is articulated. As stated by Zapata (2022), citizenship and cohesion shape each other, so much so that it can be argued that the former is a process of cohesion-making and that the latter is a necessary condition of it. In this perspective, citizenship is not just a set of codified rights and duties, but a tool to build bonds between individuals and institutions, to regulate access to collective resources, and to define who

belongs to the community and who is excluded from it. However, the notion of cohesion itself remains elusive and subject to divergent interpretations. While it can be understood as the consolidation of a social fabric based on ties and connections, it can also imply its antithesis, namely fragmentation and isolation. Burns and colleagues (2018) note that the opposite of cohesion is not necessarily open conflict, but rather an atomised society in which individuals and groups live parallel existences, without sharing spaces of interaction. In this sense, social cohesion policies can take very different directions depending on the premises on which they are based. The concept of cohesion is never neutral, but always contextualised and politically charged. Its instrumentalisation can either legitimise exclusionary measures, reinforcing the distance between majority and minority groups, or it can be used as a device to promote a more inclusive idea of citizenship, in which diversity is seen as a resource rather than an obstacle. The ambivalence of this notion is evident in the public debate, where it is often used as a synonym for national identity, collective belonging and connection to a territory. The persistence of a rhetoric that associates cohesion with cultural homogeneity betrays a vision according to which social stability would only be possible within culturally uniform communities, while differences would inevitably be perceived as elements of disintegration (Zapata-Barrero 2022). The implications of this narrative on urban policies and diversity management are profound. The strategic use of cohesion can serve to justify interventions that, instead of fostering plurality, reinforce barriers between groups and limit the possibility of real interaction. The problem is further exacerbated when the discourse on cohesion becomes intertwined with that on citizenship, as access to public recognition is often subordinated not only to legal criteria, but also to the ability to adhere to dominant cultural models. As a result, cohesion, rather than being a shared goal, becomes the yardstick by which to assess who can be considered an integral part of society and who instead must remain on the margins.

The political debate on cohesion develops around the question of how to reduce social tensions and achieve a balance between freedom and pluralism. This tension is rooted in the liberal tradition, which has always conceived cohesion as a regulatory mechanism of diversity, anchoring it to a homogeneous national idea of society. The conception of a liberal nationalist cohesive society has thus strengthened over time, crystallising around the idea that social stability is guaranteed by a shared set of values and practices, rather than by a dynamic process of negotiation between heterogeneous

subjects and groups. However, the current global era, which can be described first and foremost as an era of human mobility, has profoundly changed this scenario, introducing increasingly complex forms of plurality into social systems. Diversity today is not only about differences generated by migration, but is intertwined with pre-existing factors such as social class, gender, sexual orientation, level of education and national affiliation. Pluralism has been replaced by diversity as the dominant conceptual framework in public debate, marking a shift that implies not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative transformation of social composition.

Fonseca et al. (2019) identify at least two key perspectives to interpret this transformation, outlining a kind of dual nature of the concept of cohesion. It can take on either a reactive or a proactive meaning, depending on the historical and political conditions in which it is mobilised. On the one hand, cohesion can be defined negatively, as the absence of latent conflicts and social fractures. The disconnection between individuals and society, when determined by factors such as wealth, ethnicity, race or gender, is perceived as a destabilising factor, a sign of vulnerability that jeopardises the integrity of the collective fabric. In this sense, cohesion is often interpreted as a form of social control, aimed at preventing tensions and deviance rather than promoting real inclusion. On the other hand, cohesion can have a proactive value, understood as the presence of strong ties between individuals and social groups. In this perspective, stability is not limited to the regulation of differences through law, but is actively built through bonds of solidarity, belonging and shared loyalty (Fenger 2012; Burns et al. 2018). Cohesion is thus not only a mechanism of social order, but also a process through which a sense of belonging is continually negotiated and redefined. Zapata offers an overview of the different interpretations of cohesion and traces a genealogy of its use (Zapata 2022). He highlights how it is considered a crucial element in the resilience of societies, especially in fragile or post-conflict contexts. Resilience not only manifests itself psychologically, but also in social and political terms, influencing the perception of changes induced by the arrival of new groups. The entry of individuals from different backgrounds can be perceived as an acute shock or turn into a chronic source of stress for the existing social system, altering its equilibrium and challenging established mechanisms of belonging (Biggs et al., 2016).

Having thus clarified the substance of the concept of cohesion and its theoretical implications, it is evident how it stands in stark contrast to the

historical reality of pre-modern societies and cities, pre-dating the formation of the nation-state, as well as that preceding the entry of codified forms of ethnic and national diversity. The idea that social cohesion was a pre-existing condition, found before the massive arrival of migrant groups and their cultural practices, is an unfounded assumption. Social stratification, intergenerational fractures, socio-cultural fragmentation and differences between different regional and micro-local areas, which are always in flux, testify to the fact that homogeneity was never a starting condition, but rather an *ex post* construction. As a consequence, the renewed interest in cohesion seems to respond to logics that have more to do with the management of diversity perceived as a threat, rather than with a genuine concern for social resilience. The assumption that cohesion is a necessary condition for society to the point that both can be intertwined often translates into a romantic narrative that identifies new forms of diversity as the main factor in the disintegration of society, undermining its supposed traditional and national form. This kind of rhetoric is rooted in a nationalist conception of cohesion, according to which cultural and identity homogeneity would represent the only fertile ground for social integration. It is precisely this idea of cohesion as a pre-existing reality, shattered by the arrival of ethnically or culturally distinct elements, that needs to be challenged. Cohesion itself, in fact, has never been a neutral concept, but a construction modelled by nation states to legitimise a monolithic idea of social homogeneity, shaped on the characteristics and values of the majority group. In this sense, Zapata does not seem to critically address the fallacy of this assumption, namely the conception of cohesion as a structural reality that precedes the emergence of ethno-national difference. Most of the political thinking before globalisation and the emergence of new forms of diversity into our societies assumes this national scale of cohesion-building. However, a multiscale movement is now emerging in migration studies, which seeks to question the conceptual dependence on the national level in defining analytical categories (as also highlighted in this volume). The aim is to explore other scales of analysis, shifting the focus from the macro level of state institutions to the more circumscribed level of urban and local dynamics. Through what has been referred to as the local turn in migration studies (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2018; Caponio et al. 2019), it opens up the possibility of taking a bottom-up approach to social cohesion. This perspective allows us to observe how cohesion is constructed in the everyday interactions in neighbourhoods, squares, buildings and homes, through the micro-politics of interpersonal

relations. Peace and Spoonley (2019) point out that it is precisely these small mechanisms, the everyday exchanges, the sharing of spaces, neighbourhood practices, that determine the processes of cohesion building. Even when a certain sense of belonging is considered a condition for cohesion, this does not necessarily imply a connection to the nation or the national flag, but rather a sense of rootedness in a specific place and space (Mehta, 2019), operating on sub-territorial scales.

Applying these reflections to the Italian context, Briata's (2008, 2012) contribution offers a critical reading of the urban dynamics related to migrant settlement, questioning the paradigm of spatial intervention policies that interpret concentration as an anomaly to be corrected. In a context characterised by multi-ethnic settlements that, while maintaining considerable heterogeneity, rarely exceed 20-25% of the resident population, the author overturns the traditional reading according to which these phenomena constitute a form of segregation to be eradicated. Following the perspective of the cities of difference (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998), Briata instead highlights how the coexistence of Italians and foreigners generates socio-spatial fabrics that, far from being exclusively problematic, reveal latent resources and energies that could be positively coopted.

The analysis focuses on three main types of spatial intervention. On the one hand, strategies that aim to break migrant territoriality by regulating or limiting the intensive use of public space by immigrants through urban renewal operations designed to attract the native population. On the other hand, redevelopment policies for residential settlements with a significant foreign presence, which although often presented as tools for rebalancing, tend to reproduce dispersion processes that mainly affect the most vulnerable groups. Finally, a third strand of intervention concerns neighbourhoods where ethnic economic activities, such as neighbourhood commerce run by immigrants, play a crucial role in maintaining urban vitality, without however receiving adequate recognition. As pointed out by Ambrosini (2010) and Grandi (2008), these activities respond to the progressive retreat of Italian local trade and operate often in conditions of regulatory uncertainty, with control measures that reflect a logic of containment rather than enhancement.

A central point in Briata's reflection concerns the way in which concentration is conceptualised not only as a quantitative datum, but as a discursive construct laden with normative assumptions. Anti-segregation policies, geared towards the dispersal of migrants in order to avoid the

formation of ghettos, are based on a vision that assumes forced mixing between socio-economic groups as a necessary condition for the social mix (Home 1997; Yiftachel 1990). However, Briata criticises this approach, pointing out how, behind the objective of preventing degradation and promoting integration, are reductive assumptions that read segregation solely as social pathology, neglecting the historical and structural dynamics that have produced it (Raco 2003). This raises questions about the validity of analytical tools used in both academic research and urban policy. The tendency to use quantitative indicators, such as the percentage of immigrants in a given neighbourhood, without complementing them with qualitative analyses, runs the risk of giving a distorted picture of social reality. In this sense, Briata stresses the importance of complementing these metrics with an ethnographic understanding of urban life, capable of capturing residents' perceptions and experiences.

In this perspective, Briata invites a critical review of the dichotomy that opposes concentration to cohesion. The tendency to interpret migrant density as a problem to be solved overlooks the fact that, in many circumstances, ethnic communities develop strategies of self-organisation that contribute to urban stability and resilience. The author argues that social mix policies, geared towards reducing concentrations through housing dispersion, end up perpetuating a model of intervention that ignores the possibility of enhancing the internal resources of multi-ethnic communities. This approach, centred on territorial control and the avoidance of visible segregation, also risks eliminating the forms of social capital and mutualism that characterise many of these neighbourhoods.

1.7 Spatial segregation in Southern European cities

The critique of the idea of segregation as an inherently negative phenomenon has developed in parallel with a theoretical debate dominated by the urban experiences of Northern European and Anglo-Saxon contexts (Bolt et al. 2010; van Kempen and Ozuekren 1998; Peach 1996; Phillips 2007). Here, segregation has mainly been read through the prism of post-Fordist transitions and housing policies developed in states characterised by established welfare (Kazepov 2005). Southern Europe, with its specificities related to informal economies, clientelist dynamics and a strong role of the family in ensuring social protection, has frequently been placed in a peripheral position in the academic debate, with analyses that have often

applied interpretative models developed elsewhere, without adapting them to local socio-economic structures (Allen et al. 2004; Fenger 2007; Hegedüs et al. 2013).

Robinson (2006) questioned this hierarchisation of knowledge, pointing out how global urban theory has historically privileged a model centred on western cities, relegating other experiences to mere secondary variations. In this perspective, Arbaci's (2007, 2019) work represents an essential contribution in deconstructing the theoretical construction of residential segregation, showing how its conceptualisation has been shaped by political and housing experiences specific to Northern European contexts. Here, segregation has been interpreted through categories rooted in specific trajectories of industrialisation and deindustrialisation, with the adoption of models reflecting dynamics specific to British or Dutch cities, where access to public housing played a key role in regulating the social composition of urban areas. The problem, however, is not only that of a mechanical translation of theoretical categories from one context to another, but of a broader process of knowledge production that has contributed to consolidating a structural ethnocentricity in urban studies (Robinson 2006). The debate on segregation has been so dominated by an approach that has imposed an idea of 'urban normality' based on Northern European welfare models, with an emphasis on social mixité and poverty deconcentration policies (Musterd et al. 1998). The specificities of southern European cities, where access to housing has historically been regulated through familistic dynamics and informal networks, have long been neglected, while segregation processes have been interpreted as deviations from a universal model. This marginalisation is also rooted in the very structure of academic production. While France and Germany have developed their own body of studies on segregation, it has remained partly excluded from the international debate due to its lesser dissemination in English. In the southern context, however, studies on ethnic segregation remained marginal until the 1990s, when immigration forced a reconsideration of the phenomenon (Allen et al. 2004). This delay contributed to consolidating a public and academic debate still anchored to analytical categories reflecting experiences gained elsewhere: on the one hand, the political discourse continued to oscillate between the desire to respond to public perceptions and the need to manage emerging phenomena of social tension; on the other, academic research often sought legitimacy within already consolidated theoretical paradigms, producing studies that tended to compare southern segregation with the

experiences of cities such as London, Amsterdam or Berlin, without necessarily questioning the specificities of Southern Europe. The assumption of a universal model of segregation has led to the neglect of how local economies and welfare systems shape urban dynamics. In northern European contexts, segregation has been analysed in relation to the processes of deindustrialisation and post-Fordist transition, which have redefined labour markets and the structure of urban inequalities (Mingione 1995; Allen 2004). In southern Europe, on the contrary, there was no decline in large-scale industrialisation, but rather a direct transformation from agricultural to service economies, with the maintenance of a segmented labour market and labour-intensive activities (Kazepov 2005). This has produced a social and spatial stratification that differs significantly from that of Northern European cities, necessitating an adaptation of the dominant interpretative paradigms.

A further element of divergence is the nature of southern welfare, characterised by a high degree of familism and the centrality of parental networks in access to housing and the labour market (Allen et al. 2004; Leal 2004; Moreno-Fuentes and Mari-Klose 2016). Unlike the Nordic social democratic models, where the state has historically guaranteed a central role in regulating urban inequalities, in Southern European cities social protection has been delegated to the family and to forms of political patronage, generating a housing and labour model in which segregation is configured as a consequence of informal dynamics and the subsequent free market, rather than explicit policies of exclusion. The housing model of southern European cities differs markedly from that of northern European cities, reflecting logics of social stratification and segregation processes that cannot be analysed through pre-packaged categories transferable from one context to another. The Southern European housing system is in fact historically structured around three main elements: the centrality of private property, low residential mobility and a segregation that does not follow the Anglo-Saxon model of spatial polarisation between centre and periphery (Allen et al. 2004; Malheiros 1998; Petsimeris 1998). The first element, i.e. the predominance of private property, has deep roots in the family economies and welfare systems of the South, in which housing represents a form of patrimonial security rather than a commodity on the property market (Leal 2004b; Maloutas and Karadimitriou 2001). This phenomenon has contributed to a structural reduction in the social rental sector and to a population distribution that, while manifesting concentrations of inequality, does not trace the classic segregation dynamics observed in Anglo-Saxon cities. Moreover, the

absence of strong public regulation in the housing sector has fuelled practices of self-building and informal settlements, which in some cases have reduced the level of spatial segregation, while aggravating that of housing precarity.

The second element, low residential mobility, is also closely related to the structure of familistic welfare, where intergenerational support plays a crucial role in the reproduction of socioeconomic conditions. In contrast to Northern European countries, where mobility is stimulated by more flexible labour markets and more developed social protection systems, in Southern European cities maintaining one's original residence is often a key factor for access to services and family solidarity networks. This implies that phenomena such as 'white flight' or suburbanisation, typical of Northern European and American cities, occur to a limited extent or in peculiar ways (Maloutas 2004b; Leal 2002).

The third element concerns the specificities of segregation in southern European cities. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon model, in which the division between centre and periphery is clear-cut and reflects a rigid socioeconomic stratification, in Mediterranean cities a more complex distribution is observed, with a coexistence of different social groups in spatial proximity and with intergenerational mobility often rooted in the same territory. This model, referred to as 'socio-tenorial differentiation' by Arbaci (2007), implies that spatial inequalities are not immediately visible through traditional indicators of segregation, but must be analysed through more sophisticated tools, which take into account housing trajectories and less obvious but structurally persistent forms of marginalisation. Against this backdrop, southern European cities have generated alternative concepts to describe segregation, such as 'urban diaspora', which emphasises the dispersion of minorities in different sectors of the city rather than their concentration in ethnic enclaves, and 'spatially trapped social mobility', which highlights the role of home ownership in determining forms of social and residential immobility (Arbaci 2007; Leal 2004b; Maloutas & Karadimitriou 2001).

In recent decades, researchers have progressively recognised the need to rethink dominant analytical models, introducing more contextual perspectives that are less based on abstract models derived from Anglo-Saxon experiences. Comparative studies between Northern and Southern Europe have highlighted differences in segregation processes and urban policy responses (Malheiros 2002; Arbaci 2007, 2008; Musterd & Fullaondo 2008), while others have investigated the interplay between segregation, gentrification and urban renewal (Semi 2015; Arapoglou and Sayas 2009;

Briata 2010). Despite these theoretical developments, housing policies in Southern Europe continue to reflect a residualist approach, in which public intervention is limited to managing emergencies rather than developing structural strategies of housing inclusion and spatial equity (Leal 2002, 2011; Briata et al. 2009). This approach perpetuates a view of segregation as a problem of poverty concentration, rather than a consequence of broader economic and social structures.

The debate on segregation in Southern European cities is thus still being redefined, with an increasing recognition of the specificities of these contexts in the urban research landscape. This process is helping to reformulate the dominant theories, shifting the focus from a pathologising reading of segregation to a more nuanced analysis capable of capturing the dynamics of cohesion and adaptation that emerge in the multicultural neighbourhoods of Southern Europe.

1.8 Concentration or visibility?

The housing condition of immigrants in Italy represents one of the most critical dimensions of social integration, with structural difficulties that have been consolidated over time and continue to characterise the Italian housing market. As Costarelli and Mugnano (2017) pointed out, the problem has its roots at least in the 1990s, when the progressive increase in foreign presence encountered a housing system characterised by structural rigidity and strong discrimination (Zincone 2000). From the point of view of spatial distribution, the housing geography of immigrants reflects the economic structure of Italian cities, with a clear prevalence of concentrations in the urban areas of the Centre-North compared to the South. However, some exceptions, such as the case of Naples, indicate that stable settlements of foreign populations are also developing in some southern cities, in contrast to the traditional idea of the Mezzogiorno as a mere territory of migratory transit (Laino 2015).

At the urban level, a progressive process of peripheralisation of immigrants emerges, who tend to progressively abandon central areas to settle in semi-peripheral or peripheral neighbourhoods (Avallone & Torre 2016). Although we tend to emphasise that levels of residential segregation in Italian cities are lower than in other European or North American metropolises, this does not imply the absence of forms of micro-segregation or ethnic concentration. Studies such as Zajczyk's (2003) have highlighted the presence of ethnic clustering phenomena in large cities, such as Milan,

while in Bologna urban interstices with a high concentration of specific migrant communities have been identified (Bergamaschi 2012).

In the case of Rome, the residential distribution of immigrants presents some peculiarities linked to the internal stratification of the foreign population and to specific labour insertion trajectories. For example, while the Filipino community tends to settle in central areas due to their proximity to domestic workplaces with well-off families, the Romanian community is more concentrated in the suburbs, according to a settlement pattern that is articulated in contiguous enclaves (Amico et al. 2013). A case in point is the Esquilino neighbourhood, known for the historical presence of the Chinese community, which since the 1990s has developed economic activities and a community support network that has made the neighbourhood one of the main reference points for migrant entrepreneurship in the capital. A further distinctive aspect of the Roman case is the internal polarisation of the migrant population, with a clear distinction between migrants belonging to the middle and upper classes, such as diplomats and officials of international organisations, and migrants from low-income countries, who are often forced into conditions of strong housing precariousness and social marginalisation (Cristaldi 2002).

The Italian issue, as we have seen, is characterised by a complexity that derives from the overlapping of multiple structural factors, which prevent the development of forms of residential concentration similar to the ethnic enclaves of other urban contexts. The perception of the migrant presence in public space and the intervention of local authorities respond more to emergency and symbolic logics than to structural strategies of urban diversity management. As a result, what becomes central to the public debate is not so much segregation per se as the visibility of certain groups, which becomes the object of regulation, control and sometimes stigmatisation. The question of the urban visibility of immigration, as we have seen, is inextricably linked with the devices of control and regulation of public space. The idea that the spatial concentration of migrants automatically triggers tensions or requires corrective interventions by institutions is a discursive construction that has accompanied urban policies in several European cities, and that in Italy finds its peculiar declination in public space management strategies. According to Brighenti (2010), visibility is never neutral: it can turn into a mechanism of recognition and legitimisation, but can also operate as an instrument of control and discipline. The threshold of 'acceptable

visibility ' then becomes a parameter by which the right to the city and the degree of accessibility of urban spaces for minority groups are measured.

Cancellieri and Ostanel (2015) highlight how, in Italy, the visible presence of migrants in urban neighbourhoods is often interpreted in terms of conflict, fuelling spatial representations that oppose a 'legitimate' community of long-term residents to migrant populations, perceived as a disruptive element. The case of the railway station in Padua is emblematic of these dynamics: the concentration of migrants in this area has generated a political and media debate that has contributed to reinforcing the narrative of the 'degradation' of public space, legitimising policies of regulation and containment. In other words, the phenomenon of visibility intersects with the processes of constructing urban discourse, helping to determine which groups can be considered a 'legitimate part' of the city and which, instead, must be managed through surveillance or dispersion interventions. Brighenti (2010) develops this analysis by emphasising the ambivalent character of visibility: while on the one hand it is a tool of social recognition, on the other it can become a control device that imposes forms of self-censorship and conformity. This perspective finds an echo in Foucault's (1975) work on panopticism, where visibility is conceptualised as a technique of government that produces disciplined subjects. In this logic, the visibility of migrants in urban spaces is not simply a given, but a social construct that always implies a dimension of power: what is visible automatically becomes subject to interpretation, categorisation and, potentially, exclusion. Bersani (1995) expands this reading by emphasising how visibility can turn into a normative trap, imposing on individuals the need to conform to certain social expectations in order to avoid marginalisation or repression.

If we look at these processes from the perspective of the migrants themselves, it is evident how visibility is often a strategic issue. In the context of settlement and adaptation processes, i.e. the practices through which individuals construct a sense of belonging in urban spaces, visibility becomes a key element in negotiating access to resources and the possibility of inhabiting public space. Brighenti (2007) suggests that making oneself visible in certain contexts can represent a form of resistance against the logics of exclusion imposed by dominant institutions and public discourses.

The relationship between visibility and invisibility is thus a constant dynamic in the processes of migrants' appropriation of urban space. Works such as Hall's (2015) on migrant urbanism, as already seen, suggest that, far from being simply a political management issue, the visible presence of

migrants in cities must be understood as a phenomenon that actively reconfigures the urban environment. Public spaces are not static entities, but are transformed through daily use and interactions between the different social groups that inhabit them. In this perspective, the problem is not visibility per se, but the way it is codified within a spatial order that continues to privilege certain subjects over others. The central question then becomes: who has the right to be visible in the city and under what conditions?

Cities, then, are not only spaces where inequalities are concentrated, but also places where visibility and reconfiguration of power relations can be negotiated. Urban landscape thus becomes the terrain where dynamics of exclusion and practices of re-appropriation clash and intertwine, transforming experiences of marginality into acts of urban citizenship. In this sense, the concept of 'space invaders' elaborated by Puwar (2004) allows us to reflect on how the presence of non-conforming bodies such as women, racial minorities, queer subjectivities in public spaces, traditionally occupied by white men, interrupts the pre-existing normative order, generating reactions that oscillate between conditional inclusion and structural resistance. This phenomenon is evident not only in formal institutions, but also in informal urban spaces, where the visibility of marginalised subjects is perceived as a violation of the status quo, requiring forms of discipline ranging from surveillance to active removal (Brighenti, 2010).

The dynamics of disidentification, conceptualised by Butler (1993), offer a further analytical tool to understand how subaltern subjectivities negotiate their presence in urban spaces. Disidentification is not only an act of subtraction, but a political strategy to actively challenge imposed categories and redefine the relationship between bodies and spaces. This process manifests itself in forms of symbolic and material appropriation of the city, such as the homemaking practices of migrant communities, which transform seemingly hostile places into spaces of aggregation and resistance (Hall, 2015). In this perspective, cities are not only the site of marginalisation, but also the field in which the possibilities of new forms of belonging are played out. This reinterpretation of urban citizenship ties in with debates on the right to the city and transnational and translocal forms of citizenship (Besserer, 1999). In contrast to the idea that the spatial concentration of migrants is an index of social distress or marginalisation, authors such as Dunn (1998) and Young (1999) propose to consider the advantages of these ethnic aggregations. According to Young, residential segregation can take the form of a structured and visible form of

'differentiated citizenship', through which minority groups assert their right to be 'together in difference', transforming their settlement into a factor of collective strength and cohesion. Rocco (1999) argues that spatial concentration is not just a phenomenon to be regulated or dispersed, but an element that can strengthen social networks and foster mobilisation for urban rights. In this perspective, the city becomes the main horizon of belonging, overcoming national citizenship as the exclusive criterion of inclusion. The role of the city as a political space is also highlighted by Davidson and Martin (2013), according to whom the urban is not simply the result of planning and construction processes, but a field of conflict and negotiation, in which marginalised subjectivities claim the right to visibility, participation and representation. This implies a critical review of urban policies, often oriented to contain rather than enhance the presence of migrant communities. The normative approach to diversity, which sees social cohesion as a value to be preserved through assimilation, clashes with the reality of a city characterised by a multiplicity of practices of coexistence and everyday resistance.

In this sense, Cingolani (2018) emphasises how diversity is not only a source of conflict, but also of social innovation. Adopting Wise's (2009) concept of everyday transversality, he points out how individuals, in their daily interactions, develop forms of sociability capable of mitigating differences and building transversal bonds between groups. These practices do not eliminate structural inequalities, but create spaces of negotiation that can transform the very meaning of social cohesion. The challenge for contemporary cities is therefore to recognise and support these forms of dynamic cohabitation, going beyond the logic of regulation and control to open up new possibilities for participation and citizenship.

CHAPTER 2 - SETTING THE URBAN CONTEXTS

The theoretical framework presented above has provided, as comprehensively and up-to-date as possible, the coordinates for understanding the various perspectives on the presence of foreigners in the territory, the ways in which Western state authorities manage this presence, the foundational assumptions underpinning their actions, and the main debates that engage them. As has emerged, the relationship between migration and the urban contexts into which it settles is both complex and layered, mediated by a set of regulatory instruments that are often conceived at a supra-local level. Within this dynamic, the nation-state functions as the main arena in which the everyday experience of urban localism unfolds. While negotiating with local realities, it nonetheless remains the primary actor, holding the authority to issue, adapt, and apply the mechanisms that govern the regularization of identities, the legal and material possibilities for remaining in the territory, and the very conditions that shape encounters and participation among heterogeneous groups.

In the Italian and specifically Roman context, a discussion of difference at the urban level cannot overlook broader theoretical and political questions, which have served as both the background and the terms of comparison throughout this research. Only by engaging these wider debates is it possible to reconstruct a picture that is as complex and multifaceted as the micro-local situation being considered, with all its historical and contextual specificity. Approaching this phenomenon through a single perspective, from only one angle or within a single line of research, proves highly problematic, as each approach – whether considering Bangladeshi migration in Italy or the community established in Rome, mainly concentrated in the eastern quadrant of the city where the research itself took place – has ultimately appeared too partial or self-referential to adequately capture the complexity and interconnection of the various factors that explain why Rome now hosts the second largest Bangladeshi community in Europe, surpassed only by London, a city whose colonial relationship with Bangladesh differs fundamentally from the Italian case.

Moreover, it remains insufficiently explained how, in a country such as Italy – which, as both recent and earlier studies suggest, is comparable to other Southern European contexts and therefore, for reasons already examined in the first chapter and to which further attention will be devoted,

is not marked by high levels of mono-national concentration or residential segregation among foreign populations – the sole exception among major cities is represented specifically by Bangladeshi migrants. Focusing for now on these first two issues, the most common answer to the first has generally relied on the idea that Italy as a whole, and Rome in particular, have in recent decades been used by Bangladeshi migrants as a “back door” for initial access to Europe – a temporary step toward reaching the United Kingdom, which has represented the true final destination of the migratory project (King and Knights 1994; Priori 2012; Della Puppa 2014; Della Puppa and King 2018). With the introduction of restrictions in the United Kingdom during the 1960s, and later in other countries of Northern and Central Europe, migration from outside Europe increasingly turned toward the countries of Southern Europe. This shift resulted from the closure of legal channels and ever-tightening immigration laws in Northern Europe, while until the 1980s, Southern European countries were still characterized by the absence of laws limiting immigration, or, in any case, by relatively open frameworks. Italy, having thus become the physical frontier of the European continent, came to be configured as one of the main gateways for non-European migrants, serving as a bridge for subsequent migration toward more desirable destinations (Della Puppa 2014; Della Puppa and King 2018).

While this explanation remains valid and realistic, it still appears to leave certain key aspects of the migration and settlement strategies of Bangladeshis in Italy unaddressed. The Italian regulatory and institutional response to immigration – partly as a result of the gradual harmonization of migration rules at the European level (Tjønn 2018) – has become markedly more restrictive. The labour market and the economy, which until the 1990s placed Italy in a privileged position compared to other countries of Southern Europe, have also changed and no longer offer a real advantage over, for example, Spain in recent years¹. Yet, the numerical significance of

¹ In the past seven years (2018–2024), the Spanish economy has grown considerably faster than the Italian one: Madrid’s real GDP increased on average by just under 2% per year – ending 2024 with a +3.2% – while Italy remained below 1% annually and closed 2024 with only +0.5%. The labour market reflects this difference: employment among people aged 20–64 reached 71.7% in Spain (2024), compared to 67.1% in Italy. A crucial factor in the Spanish case is the contribution of the foreign workforce: by the end of 2023, the employment rate of non-EU nationals in Spain rose to 68% (compared to the EU average of 63%), whereas in Italy it remained around 61%. Furthermore, between 2022 and 2024, immigrants accounted for 64% of new jobs created and today represent 13% of total employment; in Italy, the employment rate of non-Italian nationals stands at 65.1% and their unemployment rate (11.3%) remains almost double that of the native population (7.2%).

In summary, Spain combines more robust macroeconomic growth with a dynamic labour market that largely absorbs foreign labour, while Italy continues to progress at a much more moderate pace and faces greater challenges in integrating foreigners into employment. For further details, see the 2025 European Commission report <https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e9de23c8-b161-40d0->

Bangladeshi arrivals in Italy has not diminished and remains markedly higher than in any other European country, including those in Southern Europe (figure 1). In addition, according to the 2023 IOM report on Bangladeshi migration in Europe, Italy emerges as the intended country of destination for 59 percent of those surveyed at the time of departure from Bangladesh, and as the desired destination for 83 percent of respondents at the time of the interview. The number of arrivals², the volume of asylum applications (figure 2), and the absolute numerical presence all indicate that the reasons leading Bangladeshi migrants to favour Italy as a destination can no longer be justified exclusively by the older criteria previously mentioned. Another explanation that has traditionally been advanced is the idea that the established and consolidated Bangladeshi presence in Italy can be traced, first, to the formation of migration chains (Reyneri 1979) and, later, to the development of migration networks (Massey 1988; Castles 2004)³. These mechanisms are thought to have created favourable conditions for the arrival of ever greater numbers of compatriots, giving rise to a self-sustaining migratory circuit and to a stable settlement pattern, supported by a transnational social field that, over time, has become increasingly structured and less vulnerable to risk (Della Puppa 2014; Priori et al. 2020).

However, while this aspect is undeniably significant, it nonetheless remains only a partial explanation, as it does not fully account for the fact that, over the course of nearly four decades of Bangladeshi migration to Europe, similar processes have not taken root in other Southern European

9ad7-e04a25500023_en?filename=ip318_en.pdf; Eurostat data
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TEC00115/default/table>; data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics <https://ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/es/EPA4T24.htm>; and for Italy, ISTAT data <https://noi-italia.istat.it/pagina.php?L=0&categoria=4&dove=ITA&utm>.

² Among those arriving in Europe over the course of the year are individuals who have undertaken the so-called “Balkan route,” and who, as a result, have not necessarily entered Europe via its maritime borders or, consequently, through the countries of Southern Europe. For a comprehensive overview of the differentiation between land and sea arrivals in Europe from Bangladesh, reference should be made to the annual report published by the IOM on Bangladeshi migration: <https://bangladesh.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11006/files/documents/2024-11/nationals-from-bangladesh-in-europe-2023-snapshot.pdf>.

³ Migration chains refer to the sequential and interdependent movements set in motion by a pioneer migrant who, by means of loans to cover travel expenses, hospitality, and the transmission of essential initial information, encourages the subsequent arrival of relatives or fellow villagers. The concept, originally anticipated by Ravenstein (1885) and later formalized by Reyneri in relation to Mediterranean migration to Northern Europe (1979), captures this process. Migration networks, on the other hand, indicate the broader and more complex set of kin, friendship, ethnic, or professional ties connecting migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants between places of origin and destination. These ties reduce both the costs and risks of migration, while also providing social capital (Massey 1988).

The essential distinction, therefore, concerns scale and structure: the chain is linear, limited to close ties, and tends to exhaust itself with the completion of family reunification, while the network, characterized by its reticular and multi-level structure, survives the initial reasons for migration, as it encompasses institutionalized channels, market intermediaries, and forms of collective self-organization.

countries. Nor does it adequately explain why this phenomenon has continued to grow in Italy – where the Bangladeshi community represents the national group with the highest growth rate, recording an increase of 32.8 percent between 2019 and 2023 (ONC Report 2024).

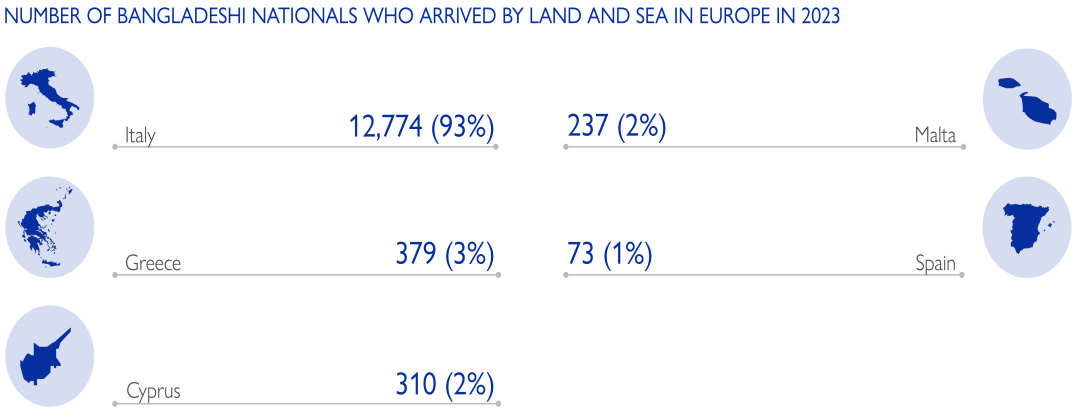


Figure 1 Source: IOM 2023 on Eurostat data

EU		Ireland		Romania	
Syria	147 965	Nigeria	4 015	Syria	715
Venezuela	72 775	Jordan	2 860	Nepal	205
Afghanistan	72 155	Pakistan	1 385	Iraq	205
Colombia	50 330	Somalia	1 305	Bangladesh	125
Türkiye	46 835	Bangladesh	1 005	Palestine	120
Other	521 890	Other	7 865	Other	895
Spain		Greece		Italy	
Venezuela	65 460	Syria	21 885	Bangladesh	32 865
Colombia	39 765	Afghanistan	15 150	Peru	15 595
Mali	10 585	Egypt	7 085	Pakistan	11 740
Peru	10 360	Türkiye	4 230	Egypt	11 595
Senegal	7 655	Palestine	2 570	Morocco	9 985
Other	30 185	Other	18 080	Other	69 340

Figure 2 Five main citizenships of first-time asylum applicants in EU and in selected Countries, 2024. The excluded Countries do not show applications from Bangladeshi nationals. Source: Eurostat 2024

The data presented in this context are therefore difficult to interpret as the mere, inertial continuation of the initial pioneering phase (Priori 2012). Indeed, Rome alone currently counts approximately 39,658 Bangladeshi residents – a number that approaches the combined total of Bangladeshi residents in entire countries such as Spain (18,867), Portugal (15,750), and

Greece (10,500), according to data from the Municipality of Rome (2023) and IOM elaborations on Eurostat data (2023). At the same time, continuing to regard Italy simply as a back door and as a transnational platform for subsequent onward or stepwise migration⁴, and to interpret settlement in Rome merely as a temporary logistical aggregation point for undocumented migrants, proves to be a reductive perspective that accounts for only one aspect of a much more complex reality. In fact, the high number of Italian citizenships obtained by Bangladeshi migrants – Bangladesh is the fourth country of origin for grants of Italian citizenship in the period 2012–2023 (Ministero del Lavoro 2023; Eurostat 2023) – can be considered an indicator of a migration process that has reached a level of consolidated maturity. This is all the more significant considering that Italy is characterized by some of the most stringent regulations and the longest timescales for the acquisition of citizenship⁵. Moreover, the substantial number of commercial activities established and managed by Bangladeshi proprietors – who now represent the fourth largest extra-EU nationality in Italy in terms of business ownership – must also be taken into account; within this, Rome stands out in particular, hosting the overwhelming majority, with 39.4% of all Bangladeshi-run enterprises in Italy concentrated within its metropolitan area (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023).

Taken together, these elements point to a long-term investment in remaining in Italy on the part of a significant share of the Bangladeshi migrant population, as well as a pronounced and sustained interest in Rome – a fact that, as will be shown, also emerges clearly from the interviews conducted. In this sense, the available data seem to indicate that, contrary to

⁴ Onward migration refers to complex and non-linear migratory trajectories, characterized both by deliberate planning and by unexpected turns prompted by personal or political events. This type of mobility often entails a multiplicity of stages and destinations, not necessarily oriented toward a predetermined final goal, but rather shaped by contingent circumstances and life-course changes. By contrast, stepwise migration denotes a more intentional and hierarchical migratory strategy, in which individuals and families deliberately select a sequence of intermediate stages in order to accumulate resources and “migration capital,” with the aim of reaching, in a planned manner, a preferred final destination. While stepwise migration is thus guided by a strategic design and a logic of progressively improving one’s own conditions, onward migration takes shape as a more fluid process, open to renegotiation and reconfiguration over time and across the family life cycle. In practice, however, these categories may overlap, as plans initially conceived as stepwise can evolve into more open and unpredictable pathways in response to new opportunities or needs. For a comprehensive overview of the topic, see Ahrens and King 2023.

⁵ On this point, see the Migrant Integration Policy Index published by the Migration Policy Group in 2019 (<https://www.mipex.eu/italy>) and the related update for 2020, available on the website of the ISMU Foundation (<https://www.ismu.org/en/migrant-integration-policy-index-mipex/#:~:text=Italy%20scores%2058%2F100%20on%20the,has%20changed%20little%20for%20immigrants>). Further insights can be found in the volume *I profili di illegittimità costituzionale della legge sulla cittadinanza*, edited by Gennaro Santoro and published in 2021 by the Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti civili (CILD), as well as in the report *Indicators of Immigrant Integration* OECD/European Commission (2023), which offers a comparative analysis of European legislation on the subject.

what has been suggested by the principal literature on this subject in Italy, a substantial proportion of the Bangladeshi community continues to display what Knights (1996c) and Zeitlyn (2006), already in the 1990s, identified – commenting on the remarkable concentration of Bangladeshi migrants in Rome – as an illogical attraction (Priori 2012). These authors, and subsequently the main scholars in the field, had envisaged Bangladeshi migration to Italy as being naturally oriented towards the northern regions, which are characterized by a labor market more closely connected to industry, and thus greater stability, regularization, and access to welfare (Quattrocchi 2003; Mantovan 2007; Della Puppa 2014). Thus, patterns continue to emerge which, in light of the approaches that have thus far predominated in analyses of Bangladeshi migration dynamics in Italy, would appear as “non-rational” even with regard to internal migratory movement. While the majority of Bangladeshis at the national level are unevenly dispersed across the regions of Northern Italy (with 46% residing in just six northern regions), a markedly significant concentration is found in the single region of Lazio (which accounts for 26.7% of the total, according to ISTAT 2022), and especially within the province of Rome. This pattern stands in clear contrast to the aforementioned “rational-economic” or opportunistic perspective on migration, as it reveals a distribution that deviates from what would be expected if migratory choices were determined solely by economic rationality or the pursuit of immediate advantage.

To summarize, several elements have contributed in creating the conditions for Italy to become the preferred country of destination for Bangladeshi migration: the European regulatory framework, which, by regularizing entry mobility toward the traditional immigration countries of the European Union, led to the opening of the maritime migration route to Southern European countries during the 1980s and 1990s; the still relatively loose nature of Italian immigration legislation at the turn of those two decades, since until that time Italy had dealt more with emigration than with immigration; regularization measures such as Law 39/1990, the so-called Martelli Law (Brunetti 2007; Della Puppa 2014), which encouraged the first flows to Italy⁶; and finally, the strengthening of migration networks, which

⁶ Law no. 39 of 28 February 1990, known as Legge Martelli and enacted as the conversion of Decree Law 416/1989, marked the first comprehensive legislative framework for immigration in Italy. This law abolished the geographical reservation to the Geneva Convention, introduced annual planning of migration flows, and granted regularly residing foreigners the right to civil registration and access to welfare services. Its most well-known provision was the regularization process (Articles 9-10), which – unlike the previous regularization of 1986 – did not require proof of an employment contract, but only a document attesting to presence in the country prior to 1 January 1990 (even a fiscal receipt dated from before 31 December 1989

provided information, credit, hospitality, and access to employment. All these factors account for the initial causes of this phenomenon and for part of its developments, but not for its failure to reach “saturation” after a rather significant period of time, as would typically be expected from such processes (Light et al. 1993; Ambrosini 2005), nor for the current lived reality of a significant segment of the main actors who inhabit and animate the area and who reside there on a stable basis. Although Bangladeshi migrants have been described as opportunists of migration, engaged in the pursuit of wealth across continents, as surfers and opportunists (King and Knights 1994) seeking the most strategic opportunities to improve their economic condition by taking advantage of new legislative or work-related opportunities, the present work has proceeded from the perspective that there may be more than simple opportunistic rationalism behind the strategies of many Bangladeshi migrants in Rome, and that their agency is not entirely limited to the implementation of practices aimed at economic survival or to the deterministic constraints imposed by the macro-structural characteristics of the settlement context.

In this way, the discussion approaches the second question raised at the beginning, namely the tendency of Bangladeshis to concentrate in specific urban areas and the formation of potential ethnic enclaves. Studies that have addressed this issue from an Italian perspective, and specifically with regard to Bangladeshi migration in Italy, have focused, on the quantitative side, mainly on determining the degree of segregation. In the Italian migration landscape – which, as mentioned, is characterized by relatively low aggregate levels of segregation and by a “mosaic” of micro-enclaves (Arbaci and Malheiros 2009; Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Arbaci 2019) – Bangladeshis constitute an exception that, although not unique, appears in some respects to be more pronounced. In spatial terms, Bangladeshis in Rome show a marked tendency toward territorial concentration in certain neighborhoods. Recent studies based on detailed municipal data (covering 155 urban areas and 13,656 census sections) confirm that Bangladeshi residents display a highly polarized settlement pattern, with high concentrations in certain central areas and in the first eastern peri-central ring of the city, and a limited presence elsewhere

was sufficient), leading to the regularization of around 225,000 individuals. This requirement, which was easy to satisfy, produced a strong effect: news of the regularization intensified inflows in 1989, and arrivals continued to increase in 1990, especially towards Rome and other main settlement areas (see on this Accorinti 1999; Einaudi 2007; Brunetti 2007. For its impact on Bangladeshi migration to Italy, see Knights 1996; Zeitlyn 2006; Priori 2012).

(Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Benassi et al. 2022; Crisci and Santurro 2023). In particular, areas such as the Esquilino district (a central area adjacent to the main railway station) and the eastern quadrant, in the neighborhoods of Torpignattara-Pigneto/Marranella, stand out for the density of the Bangladeshi population (Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Pompeo 2012; Priori 2012). Here, in the traditionally working-class urban fabric of Marranella and along the axis of via Torpignattara-via Acqua Bullicante, a clearly recognizable Bangladeshi enclave has taken shape over time, characterized by a dense network of shops, places of worship, and associations managed by Asian immigrants, predominantly Bangladeshis. The data confirm these observations.

In Rome, the dissimilarity index⁷ for Bangladeshis in comparison with the Italian population was estimated at around 0.65 in 2020, one of the highest values among the immigrant groups considered (Crisci and Santurro 2023). This means that about 65% of Bangladeshi residents would have to move to a different neighborhood in order to achieve a uniform distribution across the city – a figure that points not only to a tendency toward self-segregation, but also to a genuine “territorial resistance” to the dynamics of dispersion that characterize other migrant groups. Only the Chinese display a slightly higher level of segregation ($DI \approx 0.69$), while other groups show lower segregation values (for example, among the two most numerous groups in the capital: Filipinos ≈ 0.56 ; Romanians ≈ 0.45). Romanians tend to be concentrated in metropolitan belts, Filipinos follow the decentralized distribution of domestic employers, while the Chinese are more micro-

⁷ The indicators used in the studies examined and referenced here can be summarized as follows:

The dissimilarity index (Duncan’s D) measures the extent to which the distribution of a minority group deviates from that of the rest of the population within the territorial units considered. The value ranges from 0 (complete mixing) to 1 (complete separation), and intuitively indicates the share of minority group members who would have to move to another area in order for each area to have the same composition as the whole. In the literature, values below 0.30 are generally interpreted as low segregation, values between 0.30 and 0.60 as medium, and values above 0.60 as high.

Bell’s isolation index (B) assesses the average probability that two people in the same area belong to the same group. A value close to 1 indicates that the group tends to live in “single-group” environments, while values close to 0 suggest a distribution that is homogeneous across the entire territory.

The Location Quotient (LQ) is an indicator that compares the proportion of the group in a given unit (census tract, neighborhood, grid cell, etc.) with its proportion in the entire reference area. $LQ = 1$ indicates proportional representation; $LQ < 1$ indicates underrepresentation; $LQ > 1$ indicates overrepresentation. Since it has no upper limit (it can range from 0 to “infinity”), it allows for the identification of both areas of dispersion and highly concentrated “enclaves”.

Micro Segregated Areas (MSA) are designed to reveal “hidden” concentrations. An MSA is a census tract where the group’s $LQ \geq 4$, even though the group is underrepresented in the larger neighborhood ($LQ < 1$). These are thus “interstitial” micro-areas of strong ethnic concentration embedded within neighborhoods that appear otherwise mixed. The identification of MSAs makes it possible to analyze segregation at a very fine scale, to map critical situations, and to assess, using statistical models, the socio-demographic profiles of residents in these areas (see, among others, Benassi et al. 2022; Bitonti et al. 2023; Crisci and Santurro 2023).

segregated, forming central commercial clusters (Bitonti et al. 2023; Crisci and Santurro 2023). It follows that Bangladeshis are currently the most compact and territorially persistent group among the main non-European immigrants in the principal cities of Milan, Rome, and Naples, and, despite being a relatively new community and numerically smaller than the others mentioned, they tend to concentrate spatially to a marked degree. A long-term comparison between Rome and Milan confirms that the dissimilarity index for Bangladeshis, and therefore their levels of segregation, are relatively high in both cities, while those for larger communities such as Romanians remain at average levels (Benassi et al. 2020). A closer look shows that in Rome, approximately half of the entire Bangladeshi diaspora in the city today lives in 179 micro-segregated areas (MSA) – census tracts where their location quotient exceeds the citywide average by a factor of four – thus, more than half of Bangladeshi residents in Rome live in micro-areas where compatriots are overrepresented, while only about 9% reside in areas where Bangladeshis are underrepresented (Crisci and Santurro 2023).

As mentioned, the Chinese component shows slightly higher levels of segregation ($D\ 0.693$) compared to Bangladeshis ($D\ 0.655$); however, there are several aspects that make it possible to draw important distinctions between the two groups. Chinese and Bangladeshi migrants exhibit the highest levels of segregation among immigrant groups in Italy (Benassi et al. 2022; Bitonti et al. 2023), yet they follow different urban trajectories. A first element that reveals the divergence between the two groups is Bell's isolation index (B): in Rome, the value for Bangladeshis reaches 0.2203, while for the Chinese it stands at 0.074. In substantive terms, this means that a Bangladeshi resident has over a 22% probability of sharing their residential space with a compatriot, a probability that drops to about 7% for the Chinese. This gap reflects two distinct patterns: the Bangladeshi model is based on intensive proximity, maintaining a high level of ethnic density even when the settlement becomes more decentralized; the Chinese model, on the other hand, is characterized by a presence which, although concentrated in certain central commercial hubs, remains a minority within the overall population of census units, thus lowering the value of B . The analyses by Benassi et al. (2022) and, in particular, the micro-territorial study by Crisci and Santurro (2023) further clarify the form this dynamic takes.

While Bangladeshis tend initially to settle in micro-segregated areas (MSA) and then gradually move toward larger and more stable enclaves, the Chinese follow the opposite tendency, progressively reinforcing their

presence in MSAs, especially in central or semi-central parts of the city. As noted, MSAs are defined as small areas with a strong overrepresentation of an ethnic group compared to the surrounding context. These micro-areas do not constitute actual ethnic neighborhoods, but rather smaller segments of urban fabric characterized by a marked concentration of compatriots within areas where the same national group otherwise presents levels of presence not very different from those of the majority population. For Bangladeshis, the choice to reside in MSAs occurs mainly during the initial stages of their migratory trajectory, when access to the housing market and to employment depends heavily on co-ethnic social networks. This initial housing choice responds to economic and social needs, as living close to compatriots facilitates access to information, informal support services, and job opportunities in retail and the restaurant sector. However, as the length of residence increases, the probability that Bangladeshis will live in an MSA progressively declines. After twenty years in Rome, most Bangladeshis move to neighborhoods with a greater concentration of compatriots, which can be considered ethnic enclaves. This transition reflects a settlement pattern in which MSAs serve as a springboard toward spaces that are more established and better structured in social and relational terms. The enclave thus becomes a place of family stabilization and strengthening of community networks, allowing migrants to benefit from more robust social capital. For the Chinese, on the other hand, the settlement model appears to follow a different logic. They too tend to settle initially in MSAs, but unlike Bangladeshis, their presence in these areas does not decrease over time; in fact, it becomes even stronger, particularly in central or semi-central urban contexts that are often characterized by high socio-economic status. This phenomenon is linked to an economic accumulation strategy that finds fertile ground in MSAs for the development of commercial and entrepreneurial activities, such as import-export shops, restaurants, and logistics enterprises. The choice to remain in central areas is also related to the need to stay close to tourist flows and the city's main economic arteries, thus enabling more efficient business management and greater commercial visibility. Unlike Bangladeshis, who tend to move toward semi-centralized peripheries in search of larger and more affordable housing, the Chinese increase residential density in central MSAs, accepting overcrowded conditions in order to remain close to their economic networks. This choice seems to depart from the forms of heterolocalism (Zelinsky & Lee 1998) classically attributed to the Chinese presence in Italy (Ceccagno 2003), as recent trends

indicate that the city center remains both the residential and productive core, contrary to the classic theory that sees migrant communities gradually moving toward the urban periphery. Thus, while Bangladeshis use MSAs as a kind of temporary bridge that allows them to consolidate social ties and economic resources before integrating into larger, more stable, and deeply rooted enclaves of compatriots, the Chinese exploit MSAs as permanent micro-enclaves, strategically positioned to maximize economic returns and to maintain strong connections with central commercial flows (see Benassi et al. 2022; Crisci and Santurro 2023; Bitonti et al. 2023).

However, although statistical data seem to outline a pattern consistent with the popular perception of the area, the literature tends to provide a generalized explanation of the phenomenon, often anchoring itself to established interpretations that attribute these dynamics primarily to the convenience of low rents or to the deterioration of the housing stock in the areas concerned (Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Crisci and Santurro 2023). While these explanations are undoubtedly relevant, they sometimes appear partial if not accompanied by a deeper analysis of everyday dynamics and the subjective perceptions of social actors. As will become clearer in the following sections, ethnographic investigation provides a more nuanced picture, in which numbers, taken in isolation, risk being not only insufficiently explanatory but even misleading. They acquire a more meaningful explanatory power when considered in relation to social representations (Russo 2024), which are capable of offering a more layered reading of reality, and when they are contextualized through the lived experience that those numbers attempt to represent. In this perspective, statistical interpretation becomes a starting point, a tool for orientation that needs to be enriched by extended fieldwork and by comparison with other, more fine-grained indicators.

In this regard, an examination of rental values already shows that the monthly price per square meter in the areas of Torpignattara and neighboring zones ranges between 11 and 20 euros, with an increase of about 20 percent over the past five years. This stands in contrast to values of around 7.5 to 13 euros per square meter in the neighborhoods of the second eastern periphery such as Torre Angela, Borghesiana, Giardinetti, and Torbellamonaca⁸, which are generally mentioned as peripheral districts where migrants tend to

⁸ Data drawn from the Immobiliare.it portal for the period from 2019 to 2025, calculated on the basis of property value quotations from the Osservatorio dell'Agenzia delle Entrate (Real Estate Market Observatory of the Italian Revenue Agency), and compared with real-time analyses from Borsinoimmobiliare.it for 2025.

concentrate due to the deteriorated condition of the housing stock and, specifically, because of lower rental prices.

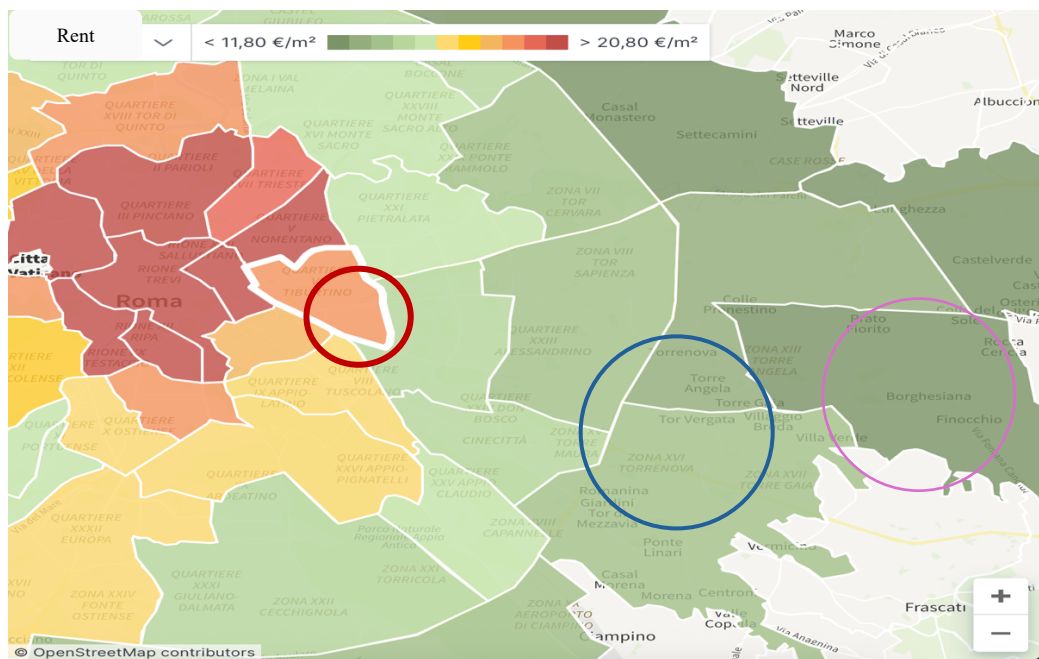


Figure 3 Rental values per square meter by area of Rome, taken from the *Immobiliare.it* website as of 14/04/2025. The red circle indicates the area of Torpignattara; the blue and purple circles indicate, respectively, the areas including Torre Angela, Giardinetti, and Tor Bella Monaca, and the area of Borghesiana/Finocchio.

Data from the Municipality of Rome on Bangladeshis registered in the municipal registry by district for the period 2019-2023 show their presence has remained consistently high in District V, which includes Torpignattara, increasing from 9,661 in 2019 to 10,154 in 2023. In the same period, their numbers in other districts only exceed 4,000 in District VII⁹, remaining below this threshold in all others. District VI, which includes the aforementioned neighborhoods such as Torre Angela, Tor Bella Monaca, and Borghesiana – and which, in fact, is the district with the highest number of foreigners in the city (45,716 as of 31/12/2023) – counts 2,252 Bangladeshi residents (Municipality of Rome 2023 data). This actually highlights a tendency among a significant segment of the Bangladeshi population to resist the centrifugal push towards the more economically affordable residential areas of the city. As already noted, this is confirmed by field observation, which points out that

⁹ The number of Bangladeshi residents registered in the municipal registry in District VII amounts to 4,821 as of 31/12/2023. This district includes the Tuscolano neighborhood (adjacent to Torpignattara), which has historically been characterized by a significant Bangladeshi presence (Priori 2012; Pompeo 2012). In Tuscolano, Bangladeshis are employed predominantly as workers in Italian-owned commercial establishments, whereas in Torpignattara they are more often employed as entrepreneurs or collaborators in businesses managed by compatriots.

even those who in recent years have moved out of necessity to the more peripheral eastern zones still see Torpignattara as central and attractive for the essential aspects of social life and intracommunity political activities. The more peripheral neighborhoods, therefore, function more as dormitory districts, according to the model described above, with the micro-clusters serving primarily as a transitional stage in the hope of reaching or returning to the logistical heart of the community's public and associational life. In line with fieldwork, this suggests that the attractiveness of the Torpignattara area is increasing both for a new wave of young, middle- to upper-middle-class Italian professionals and for Bangladeshis, in what increasingly appears as a struggle for living space in the area.

Turning now to the issue of the condition of the housing stock and public housing, it should be noted that some scholarship tends to associate Roman peripheral areas with a high concentration of migrants not only with the deterioration of the building stock but also with the concentration of public residential housing. This reading, probably influenced by an interpretive overlap with the urban model of cities in Northern Italy, nevertheless proves to be partial if not examined through a closer lens that captures the specific territorial characteristics involved (see, among others, Cancellieri and Scandurra 2012; Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Artero and Chiodelli 2020; Crisci and Santurro 2023). Evaluating the quality of housing in terms of degradation risks misinterpreting the urban reality of Rome, where the economic value of buildings does not always correspond directly to their quality or state of preservation. This is due to a complex intertwining of factors: the territorial extension of the city, the fragmentation of services, and uneven urban development, where redevelopment projects in semi-central areas are slow and partial while the periphery is marked by a proliferation of new speculative building projects (Hökerberg 2013; Higgins 2014; Salvati 2015). These have produced a housing landscape in which distance from the center, the quality of transport infrastructure, and the availability of services represent decisive elements in defining the symbolic value and prestige of areas and, consequently, the value of real estate, much more than the actual material condition of the buildings themselves (Ferrarotti 1970; Berdini 2010; Cellamare 2014; Cerulli and Vereni 2021). It is not uncommon, in fact, to find buildings of modest quality in central areas but with high prices, while in peripheral areas, even where structures are newer and better maintained, the long-standing lack of essential services and infrastructure has greatly limited their attractiveness and reputation over time. In this sense, property values are

structured not primarily according to the physical quality of the buildings, but rather according to strategic location and the area's long-term potential for appreciation, which tend to overlap with a prevailing stigma or prestige based on a symbolic value acquired over time, often regardless of the real residential quality (Cerulli and Vereni 2021).

With regard to access to public housing by the foreign population, a further distinction can be drawn between Rome and the cities of Northern Italy. The literature often notes that urban areas with the highest concentration of migrants are also those containing large sections of public residential housing (Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Artero and Chiodelli 2020; Crisci and Santurro 2023), Rome included, suggesting a correlation between the two factors and implying that the strong migrant presence can be explained by residence in public units. The topic is likewise prominent in political debate, fuelled by media narratives that present immigrants as benefitting from preferential access to public housing at the expense of Italians¹⁰. Without proper contextualisation, this reading can mislead in the case of Bangladeshis as well. At national level, a census carried out by Federcasa – the association of public bodies that manage Public Residential Housing (ERP) – records that, of roughly 1.4 million ERP tenants in 2016, 87.2 percent were Italian and 12.8 percent foreign (Caritas 2019, 2022; Federcasa 2021; Istat 2022; ERP Rome Yearbook 2023). The latter share, about 168 000 persons, includes both EU and non-EU citizens, as detailed breakdowns are not available for every municipality¹¹. ERP is allocated locally through calls based on criteria of need such as low income, inadequate housing conditions, the presence of minors or disabled family members, and length of residence in the area. Almost half of the families applying for public housing are foreign (45.6 percent), yet the limited stock means that far fewer receive an allocation: waiting lists favour

¹⁰ A brief selection of articles on the subject is available at <https://osservatoriocasaroma.com/category/i-falsi-miti/>. Additional articles of interest are available at <https://www.huffingtonpost.it/archivio/2019/05/08/news/rom-privilegiati-per-le-case-popolari-non-e-vero-avvantaggiati-solo-per-avere-famiglie-numero-se-5286088/> and at <https://pagellapolitica.it/fact-checking/vi-do-il-dato-di-milano-il-65-delle-case-popolari-e-assegnate-ai-cittadini-stranieri-che-rappresentano-il-15-della-popolazione?>.

¹¹ It was not possible to access the Federcasa (2015) and Nomisma–Federcasa (2020) reports, which are no longer available either through the links cited in the relevant studies (for example Costarelli and Mugnano 2017; Lomonaco 2022) or in the Federcasa digital archive. The only figures still accessible are those derived from the 2011 census; consequently, the updated information and data presented here result from personal elaboration based on the following sources: *Annuario ERP Roma* https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Annuario_ERP_2023_web_P.pdf; *Rapporto Caritas 2019* https://www.caritasroma.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Rapporto_2019.pdf; *Housing in Italy through the Telescope and the Microphone 2023* https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/it/publications/reports/2023/10/housing-in-italy-through-the-telescope-and-the-microphone_111d5b6d/f76c3093-it.pdf; *Rapporto Caritas Abitare 2022* https://archivio.caritas.it/materiali/Italia/qrrp/qrrp_num1_mar2022.pdf; *Rapporto Sostenibilità MM Milano 2018* <https://mmspa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/MM-Bilanciosociale2018-senza-firme.pdf>.

applicants with longer residence and thus partly mirror different degrees of rootedness across groups. In several Northern cities where immigration is numerically larger – Bologna, Milan and Turin – foreign tenants occupy about 20 percent of ERP units. The Rome metropolitan area hosts the largest number of foreigners in Italy (517 466; Istat 2023) and possesses an extensive ERP stock: roughly 28 000 dwellings managed by Roma Capitale and about 48 000 by ATER (Azienda Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale). Even so, overlap between immigrants and public housing remains unexpectedly low. An ATER survey in 2011 recorded fewer than 800 foreign tenants out of almost 98 000 residents, under one percent, and ERP neighbourhoods proved to be the least multi-ethnic in the city (Lelo et al. 2017). While foreigners represented about 10.7 percent of Rome's population in 2011, they accounted for only two to three percent in the large ERP estates. Current estimates place the foreign share at roughly five percent (Caritas 2019; ERP Rome Yearbook 2023). The data therefore indicate that, although foreigners are statistically concentrated in districts containing significant ERP stocks, most have obtained housing on the private market rather than in public schemes.

Having examined the statistical and quantitative profiles that outline the Bangladeshi presence in Rome, we now shift our focus to the body of scholarship that has approached the topic through qualitative and ethnographic lenses, exploring the migratory dynamics and spatial concentration patterns that characterise this community. While academic literature acknowledges the rapid and steady growth of the Bangladeshi population, as well as its active role in associational life and a public visibility that makes it one of the most recognisable migrant presences in Rome's urban space (Brunetti 2007; Priori 2012; Broccolini 2014), it has tended to show less interest in investigating the reasons behind the community's tendency toward structured and visible settlement in specific urban areas, especially when compared to other foreign groups. Over the past four decades, Bangladeshi migration to Europe and to Italy has been a central topic in a substantial body of scholarly work. A first strand has focused on the forms of intra-regional mobility typical of the Bengal area (Van Schendel 1981, 2009; Mortuza 1992; Begum 1999; Afsar 2000; Alexander et al. 2016). A second has examined the transnational trajectories of this diaspora, highlighting its multilocal nature and the ongoing redefinition of routes linking South Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. These journeys have taken shape along various corridors – via Southeast Asia, the Persian Gulf, Eastern Europe, North Africa or the Balkans – often shaped by geopolitical circumstances and by the social

and migratory capital of those involved (Knights and King 1998; Siddiqui 2004; Zeitlyn 2006; Ashraf 2010). A further area of research has explored the ways in which the Bangladeshi community has developed lasting ties with several major European cities, particularly in the UK (Eade 1989, 1991; Garbin 2005, 2008). Especially noteworthy are Gardner's seminal contributions, which delve into the motivations behind migration from the Sylhet region to Britain. Her work shows that emigration is driven not solely by the desire to improve living conditions, but also by a set of values shaped by long-standing migratory chains with the UK, which have cast migration as a genuine "project of happiness" and a rite of passage into adulthood for many young Bangladeshis (Gardner 1995, 2012, 2015). In Rome, the earliest systematic studies (King & Knights 1994; Knights 1996; Knights & King 1998) documented the dramatic rise in Bangladeshi arrivals during the early 1990s, attributing this both to global geopolitical trends and to the speed and reach of chain migration networks – as well as, as discussed earlier in this chapter, to Italy's first large-scale regularisation processes. Parallel research in Italy has examined the emergence of Bangladeshi clusters in various urban contexts, from the Veneto region (Quattrocchi 2003; Della Puppa 2014) to specific districts in Rome (King & Knights 1994; Pompeo 2012; Priori 2012). In the Roman case, the broader studies of Pompeo (2012) and especially Priori (2012), together with Broccolini's ethnographic insights (2010; 2014), remain key points of reference for understanding the social, economic and symbolic morphology of the so-called Banglatown in Torpignattara. These works explore the processes of densification and rootedness that have shaped the Bangladeshi presence in the neighbourhood, analysing both internal forms of self-organisation (solidarity networks, community associations, small businesses, social spaces) and the tensions within the community itself, such as class differences, legal status, religion, generation and length of residence.

What emerges is a picture of a community far from uniform, continually negotiated through individual and collective strategies. The very label of Banglatown is controversial, now largely rejected by scholars of Bangladeshi migration in Rome and, above all, by many Bangladeshis themselves, who frequently feel trapped both by the label, whether self-ascribed or imposed from outside, and by the tangible overcrowding of compatriots in the neighbourhood. As numerous interviews confirm, such density risks producing a stigmatised image in the eyes of Italians, flattening the heterogeneity of legal statuses and degrees of integration into a single undifferentiated block, attracting stricter oversight by the authorities, and

making the area a convenient target for the rising xenophobia of segments of the native population and of organised right-wing groups. Testimonies also reveal a divide between those who, for various reasons, have been obliged to move farther out yet continue to hope for a return, and those who have always lived in the neighbourhood and – while acknowledging the problems linked to high co-ethnic density – prefer to remain. As subsequent sections will show, even though other zones, notably districts VIII and XI, have begun to emerge as alternative poles of Bangladeshi settlement, both quantitative data and interview material indicate that district V, and Torpignattara in particular, still attract the largest share of Bangladeshi residents, outstripping other parts of Rome and comparable districts elsewhere in the country. The logic and persistence of this concentration therefore remain only partly clarified and continue to invite a more nuanced theoretical reflection on the historical, economic and symbolic specificities that shape Bangladeshi settlement within the city's urban fabric.

Despite the wealth of statistical evidence and the substantial body of ethnographic studies, the literature on the topic is mostly concerned with documenting the phenomenon, without addressing the more fundamental question: why does this community, more than others, appear to resist the centrifugal forces of residential dispersal, and instead rebuild networks of proximity, solidarity, and cohesion within the (of course shifting) boundaries of specific urban areas? It is from this question that the present investigation begins. The objective is twofold: to explore the deeper reasons behind a residential behaviour that stands out in the Italian migratory landscape as something of an exception, and to examine how this exception interacts with a national context marked, on the one hand, by structural racism (Andall 2002; Calafati 2014; Garau 2015) and widespread Islamophobia (Allievi 2010; Wike et al. 2016; Chiodelli and Moroni 2017), and on the other by a tradition of low segregation and social mixing characteristic of the Mediterranean model. In other words, the Bangladeshi case compels us to ask why, in a context where systemic racism and Islamophobia are well documented, and in a context where public visibility often turns Muslim migrants into targets of social and media hostility, it is nonetheless this group, largely composed of Muslim individuals, that tends to establish cohesive and enduring residential enclaves, rather than dispersing as other equally exposed groups often do.

International literature on ethnic enclaves and spatial segregation has typically attributed such patterns to economic mutual support, kinship ties, and workplace proximity, but these models often prove insufficient – perhaps

because they are tailored to Northern European or U.S. contexts, and are therefore not entirely suited to interpreting the Italian or specifically Roman case. As already noted in Chapter One, analyses of ethnic and social segregation in European cities have tended to follow a comparative framework largely shaped by experiences from Northern and Anglo-Saxon Europe (van Kempen 2005; Musterd, Ostendorf and Breebaart 1998). This approach has often treated Southern European cities as mere deviations from a general model, without taking adequate account of their specific characteristics. In particular, early studies applied theoretical categories developed in Northern Europe without adapting them to local Southern realities, placing Southern Europe at the periphery of the academic debate (Allen et al. 2004; Fenger 2007; Hegedüs et al. 2013). The theoretical construction of segregation has been deeply rooted in the study traditions of housing policies and urban transformation in Northern countries, where deindustrialisation and the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism shaped both the urban landscape and migratory dynamics (Kazepov 2005). This led to a strong ethnocentrism in interpretive models, with urban studies from the UK and other social-democratic countries setting the tone through conceptual frameworks grounded in post-war welfare systems. The debate on housing policy, dominated by Anglophone scholarship, has tended to overlook the particularities of Southern Europe, where family networks and informal economies have profoundly shaped urban social and economic structures.

Another factor behind the marginalization of Southern Europe in debates on segregation lies in the absence of well-established research traditions on housing and migration. While Northern European countries began developing these fields in the mid-twentieth century, Southern contexts lagged behind, with studies on ethnic segregation remaining relatively underdeveloped until the 1990s. It was only with the emergence of mass immigration during the 1980s and 1990s that attention to patterns of segregation started to grow in these settings. This temporal delay is not merely institutional but reflects deeper structural differences in the trajectories of urban and economic change across Europe. In Northern Europe, growing interest in ethnic segregation was closely linked to deindustrialization and the broader shift toward post-Fordist economies, transformations that deeply reshaped labour markets and social structures in urban areas (Mingione 1995; Allen 2004). Southern European cities, by contrast, did not follow this same path. Rather than undergoing a prolonged industrial decline, many transitioned more abruptly from agricultural economies to service-based ones,

often retaining dual labour markets and high concentrations of low-skilled, labour-intensive employment (Kazepov 2005). These distinct paths of development have produced correspondingly different patterns of urban stratification. In Southern Europe, the social organization of cities has been shaped not only by economic factors but also by the enduring role of family networks and informal economies. The Southern welfare model, characterized by strong familism (Esping-Andersen 1990; Arbaci 2007, 2019) and widespread clientelism, has had a profound impact on how access to housing and employment is structured (Allen et al. 2004; Moreno-Fuentes and Mari-Klose 2016). These features set Southern European cities apart from their Northern counterparts and require adjustments to dominant analytical frameworks, which have traditionally been shaped by Northern experiences.

As a result, new conceptual tools have emerged to better describe the nature of segregation in Southern contexts that acknowledge the specificities of urban life in these regions. Concepts such as urban diaspora, spatially trapped social mobility and socio-tenorial differentiation highlight how homeownership plays a central role in shaping patterns of inequality and belonging (Leal 2004; Maloutas and Karadimitriou 2001; Arbaci 2007). In recent years, Southern European scholars have increasingly contributed to international debates on residential and ethnic segregation, pushing for more context-sensitive approaches. Comparative studies have emphasized the importance of recognizing differences between North and South (Malheiros 2002; Arbaci 2007, 2008, 2019; Musterd and Fullaondo 2008), while others have examined how segregation intersects with processes of urban renewal and gentrification (Arapoglou and Sayas 2009; Briata 2010; Semi 2015). Despite these advances, housing policies in many Southern European countries remain largely residual, focused on emergency responses rather than long-term strategies for spatial and social equity (Leal 2002, 2011; Briata et al. 2009). This reflects a broader tendency to frame segregation as an issue of concentrated poverty, rather than as the product of systemic forms of marginalization. Nonetheless, the growing recognition of the distinctive trajectories of Southern European cities is gradually reshaping dominant urban paradigms. Within the European urban landscape, Rome stands out as a paradigmatic instance of Mediterranean complexity, situated within that urban model which recent literature describes as “unfinished”, heterogeneous, layered and continually traversed by tensions between modernisation and tradition (Leontidou 1990, 1996; Cremaschi 2014; Pfirsch and Semi 2016). This ambivalent identity is rooted in historical, administrative and social

specificities that place the city in a hybrid position, a European metropolis and the capital of its state, yet also peripheral in relation to the continent's principal financial and industrial circuits, a site shaped by millennia of urban sedimentation and, at the same time, marked by persistent informality and improvisation. Rome's distinctive trajectories engage directly with the theoretical question outlined above concerning the extent to which the "dominant" urban models, developed through the study of the great north-western metropolises, can be applied universally and the extent to which they relegate to the margins cities that do not fit their parameters. Several scholars have drawn attention to this north-western bias in urban theory, whereby cities regarded as modern and global serve as the yardstick and attract academic attention, while places such as Rome are overlooked or assessed mainly in terms of their alleged deficiencies (Leontidou 1990; Robinson 2006; Roy 2011; Gemmiti et al. 2012; Marinaro and Thomassen 2014). Rome has often been portrayed as a "failed metropolis", a city permanently lagging behind the development paths typical of the industrial North (Cremaschi 2014). This narrative, circulating both in international debate and within Italian scholarship, insists on the image of a "divided and backward" city, suspended between a modern North and a rural South, and thus framed as an anomalous exception to the canonical outcomes of modernity. In a discursive environment dominated by the rhetoric of globalisation, any place that appears to elude its logics is almost inevitably regarded as marginal (Gemmiti et al. 2012; Cremaschi 2014). In the face of these readings, a critical sensibility towards traditional interpretative schemes has gradually asserted itself in recent years. A growing part of the literature invites to re-evaluate the role of ordinary cities and to overcome an urban theory that tends to judge realities such as Rome according to over-strict or standardised parameters (Robinson 2006; Roy 2011; Vereni and Thomassen 2014; Cremaschi 2014). From this perspective emerges the call for an expansive intelligence, capable of grasping even urban contexts that usually remain on the margins of global reflection (Cremaschi 2014). Hence, what emerges is a way of responding to the limit of overly broad generalisations, which have proved insufficient to capture the growing variety of spatial organisation patterns, especially in the cities of the global South and southern Europe (Cremaschi 2014). This perspective entails the urge to study Rome not as a simple deviation from a standard path, but as a peculiar case bearing distinctive combinations of material and imaginary features as part of a framework where multiple modernities coexist. Rome could thus be considered a *diversely* global city, as it nonetheless exerts a form

of global influence, both as the centre of Christianity and as an international tourist destination, but according to logics that differ from the typical patterns of large global cities with an economic-financial vocation (Vereni and Thomassen 2014). Rome, indeed, stands in a borderline position not only geographically but conceptually, oscillating between its affiliation to the core of European capitals and its persisting traits of the global South, between administrative centrality and traits of structural marginality. It makes perfect sense that scholars like Leontidou (1996) have spoken of cities such as Rome as in-between cities, bridges between Europe and the Mediterranean, places where the logic of European integration is intertwined with informal practices, emergency regimes of regularisation and historical planning gaps, which generate spaces of irregularity and forms of participation from below.

Rome's resistance to the rigid north-western templates – from the post-industrial city to the financial metropolis – makes it a vantage point for rethinking categories such as segregation, integration and urban development. On closer inspection, the Roman urban system, much like that of many other southern European cities, is shaped by a set of features that have steered its course: the predominance of private ownership and family networks in housing and welfare provision; weak and fragmented public policies within a national context whose migratory history was long defined by emigration and only recently by sizeable immigration flows; the presence of informal economies, clientelist practices and frequently ineffective public administrations (Herzfeld 2009; Garau 2015; Baudry 2016; Fricke and Gualini 2018). In Rome's case, the post-war demographic boom – from roughly 1.6 to more than 2.8 million inhabitants between 1950 and 1980 – prompted the growth of extensive informal districts that expanded beyond the bounds of the master plan, following self-build logics that still mark much of the city's outskirts (Ferrarotti 1970; Cellamare 2014). As a result, more than one-third of residents live in self-produced neighbourhoods, making Rome resemble an agglomeration of self-planned quarters rather than the product of rational planning typical of other European and North American capitals. The coexistence of a tightly protected historic centre and layered peripheries, often erected without permits and only later legalised, has given the city a “leopard-spot” pattern that strongly shapes mobility, the distribution of minority groups, access to services and the design of public policy. The city's irregular and fragmented urban structure has been profoundly influenced by its historical developments. Beginning with the fascist evictions of the 1930s, the working class was progressively displaced to the urban fringes, expelled outside the

city walls and confined to the new borgate or council houses in the suburbs (Ferrarotti 1970; Berdini 2008; Trabalzi 2014; Cellamare 2014). This process constituted the hallmark of Roman urban policy even in the following decades, continuing well beyond the Fascist period and adapting to political and administrative changes without ever substantially changing its logic. Rome has thus become a “polycentric” city, marked by deep inequalities between the centre and the periphery, in terms of services, transport, and quality of life, but also by an unusual compenetration of different social groups in particular local contexts. Exemplary are the cases of neighbourhoods such as Testaccio, San Lorenzo or Torpignattara, places in which, at least until the 1990s, forms of “social -mixing” took place, involving different socioeconomic groups, street conviviality, and cohabitation between students, workers, immigrants and old residents (Berdini 2008; Herzfeld 2009; Vereni 2021), capable of challenging the classic dichotomy between ghetto and enclave (Annunziata 2002, 2012; Agustoni and Alietti 2021; Astore and Tricarico 2024). Such diversity, rooted in Rome's social history, constitutes a far from secondary identity resource that has marked the trajectories of urban transformation and helped define the city's ongoing renewal processes. This Mediterranean characteristic - the co-presence of physical proximity and social distance - represents one of the most peculiar features of the Roman context. Micro-segregations are intertwined with a highly fragmented property structure, the result of building amnesties and the spread of private property among lower-middle class families, former squatters who later became owners. This particular urban morphology has helped to mitigate some of the effects of gentrification, which has manifested itself in Rome with a delay and in a less pervasive way than in Anglo-Saxon capitals. In historical neighbourhoods such as Trastevere, Testaccio or Monti, redevelopment has occurred more through small-scale renovations than through mass expulsions, while maintaining a share of original residents and significant social variety for a long time. The location rent and the symbolic value of the historic centre, a UNESCO heritage site, have prevented extreme speculation, but at the same time have favoured the slow selection of residents, attracted by both touristic and real estate exploitation (Gemmiti 2008; Herzfeld 2009, 2014; Higgins 2014; Astore and Tricarico 2024). Classical phenomena such as gentrification have therefore here taken on more the connotations of touristification, with the explosion of short rentals and the expulsion of permanent residents from the centre, accentuating a new form of

functional segregation between showcase city and dormitory suburbs (Serpi 2009; Herzfeld 2009; Carbone 2013; Semi 2015; Salerno 2020).

Against this backdrop, recent migratory trajectories have unfolded, with Italy, and thus Rome, becoming a country of immigration only in the 1980s and 1990s, after centuries in which the dominant phenomenon had been that of mass emigration (Melotti 1993; Pugliese 1996; Colombo 2004; Garau 2015). This growth, however, occurred in the absence of colonial traditions and without the presence of historically rooted postcolonial communities. In other countries, these circumstances had prompted a confrontation with internal diversity and encouraged a questioning of presumed ethno-cultural homogeneity, often paving the way for the development of structured integration policies (De Donno and Srivastava 2006; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012, 2015). Italian immigration policy has oscillated between strategies of control and sporadic gestures of openness, never adopting either the French-style assimilationist model or a fully institutionalised British-style multiculturalism (Grillo and Pratt 2002; Ambrosini 2012). The result has been a situation that many have described as a “non-policy”: a patchwork of partial, intermittent solutions, often delegated to secular and religious voluntary organisations or to migrants’ families themselves (Marzorati and Quassoli 2012; Garau 2015). In this context, integration has taken place much more *de facto* than *de jure*. New arrivals have mainly found their place through work, often undeclared and in sectors such as construction, domestic service, and catering, thanks to their children’s attendance at school, and through everyday sociality formed within neighbourhood networks and associations. Institutional interventions have been fragmented and inconsistent: some administrations have set up foreign residents’ councils, cultural mediators, or intercultural projects, but always, as we shall see, with limited funding and little continuity. In many cases, it has been Catholic organisations such as Caritas, Sant’Egidio, and secular NGOs that have stepped in to fill the gaps left by public institutions, providing language courses, legal assistance, and intercultural initiatives. Periodic regularisations, together with more restrictive laws, as discussed in the first chapter, have further contributed to keeping thousands of migrants in a state of legal and occupational precariousness, thus reinforcing the emergency-driven character of the Italian approach to migration (Garau 2015; Ambrosini 2012, 2018).

This complexity is also reflected in the layering of governance and in the plurality of actors involved in the management of difference in Rome – a city that, while serving as the capital and seat of the country’s institutions,

often occupies a reluctant administrative and political role (Herzfeld 1992; 2009; 2014). The city's relationship with its national representative function is marked by a certain ambiguity: on the one hand, there is a persistent sense of distance between the local population and the city's governmental role; on the other, administrative fragmentation continues to complicate any attempt at broad, coherent urban planning. Rome rarely acts as a true engine of innovation or as a site of unified governance. Instead, it operates as a mosaic of informal practices, improvised solutions and networks of proximity, devised to compensate for the shortcomings of official structures. The presence of the Catholic Church has played a part in producing a set of paternalistic practices, at times charitable, at times protective of those who do not fit into official regulatory frameworks (Chambers 2008; Garau 2015). The coexistence of state and religious authorities, of municipal bureaucracies, borough administrations and civil society organisations, has given rise to a constant tension between centralisation and localism, between legislative oscillation and bottom-up adaptation, which renders every attempt at comprehensive urban or migration policy inherently fragile. It is precisely this institutional fragility – the outcome of a historical layering stretching from the Roman Empire to the papacy to the post-1870 nation-state – that forms the backdrop against which today's dynamics of immigration, integration and urban policy play out. On the one hand, public discourse and national rhetoric continue to insist on universal citizenship and an ideal of a compact, homogeneous "Italian-ness"; on the other, administrative reality is marked by endemic difficulty in providing systematic infrastructures for access to basic services, for recognition and for multicultural inclusion. It is no coincidence that local officials and policymakers oscillate between periodic crackdowns and campaigns against "illegal" immigration and sudden gestures of hospitality or attempts at integration – sometimes promoted by the Church, sometimes by secular initiatives – without ever arriving at a coherent or lasting model (Chambers 2008; Coppola 2014; Garau 2015). This misalignment between declared logics and actual practice produces an urban environment in which the micro-political strategies of everyday coexistence, local alliances and partial forms of recognition or tolerance are quickly overwhelmed by the pressure of "neoliberal" logics, which subject everything – even the traditional Roman tendency to live and let live – to the primacy of the market and the rhetoric of security (Herzfeld 2009, 2014).

The result, as Herzfeld points out, is that illiberal forms of exclusion – racism, intolerance, the criminalisation of immigrants – can gain strength

precisely in those places where the city presents itself, at least on the surface, as tolerant or cosmopolitan. What emerges is a constant dialectic between the idealised representation of a harmonious past – the “structural nostalgia” that the Italian state mobilises as a founding myth – and the “social poetics” of adaptive strategies, improvisation and everyday forms of resistance developed by residents, both old and new, as they navigate the constraints and opportunities of urban life (Herzfeld 1996, 2009, 2014). At the level of urban policy and the representation of difference, Rome lacks a coherent and long-term vision. Strategies aimed at revitalising the city through tourism and culture, though often promoted with great rhetorical emphasis, remain largely disconnected from the realities of working-class neighbourhoods and the day-to-day dynamics through which difference is negotiated. This produces a fracture between the image of Rome as an “open-air monument” and the actually inhabited city, made up of informal networks, ethnic micro-economies, spatial appropriations and practices of coexistence that resist easy classification into standardised models (Gemmiti et al. 2012; Vereni and Thomassen 2014). When conflicts do arise – from the management of Islamic centres to restrictions on the opening hours of ethnic shops, to debates on urban security – they reflect not only local tensions but also broader dynamics: the defence of identity, competition for space, and the rhetoric of difference as a threat to the city’s fragile equilibrium.

2.1 Problem statement and research questions

The analysis of immigration and citizenship policies in the Roman context thus requires a critical contextualisation of mainstream models, a reflection on the city’s historical, administrative and symbolic specificities, and the development of analytical categories capable of capturing the complexity of the relationship between the local, the national and the global (Cremaschi 2014; Roy 2009; Rao 2006; Vereni 2021). With its historical layers and its ongoing dialectic between modernity and tradition, between the image of a showcase city and the everyday experience of difference, Rome stands as a particularly compelling case for any attempt to analyse migratory dynamics and processes of integration. To speak of Rome is, inevitably, to engage with a plurality of scales: from the local to the national, from the transnational to the global. The migratory flows that have shaped the city in recent decades – particularly the presence of the Bangladeshi community, now the largest in Europe – offer an opportunity to investigate not only support networks and

patterns of residential concentration, but also the capacity to negotiate identities and forms of belonging within a national context marked by shifting rules and discourses around alterity. In this sense, the specificity of Rome emerges as both resistance and adaptation, as the capacity of migrant communities to carve out margins of visibility and rootedness, even within a context that often tends to marginalise them and to delegate the management of diversity to improvised or emergency-based solutions. The presence of the Bangladeshi community in Rome is marked by a territorial concentration unmatched by any other migrant group in the city. Along the axis of the eastern quadrant, the succession of shops, restaurants, places of worship and community centres means that, in the collective imagination, the area is immediately associated with the Bangladeshi population, representing a phenomenon that profoundly reshapes both the urban landscape and the collective narratives that traverse the capital. The visibility and recognisability of such a community raises questions that go far beyond the local dimension, prompting reflection on what this configuration might mean for Roman and Italian society as a whole, for future public policies, for the city's ability to accommodate difference, for the future of new generations, and for the tensions that unfold around the right to space, citizenship, practices of assimilation, and decolonial identity perspectives.

During the preliminary phases of the research, it became clear that this strong presence – and the community's capacity to reshape both the urban landscape and the city's collective imagination – is marked by a paradox: while the aspirations and reference models of the Bangladeshi community are rooted in everyday Roman life, their horizon is constantly oriented towards an elsewhere that continues to exert a powerful symbolic and practical influence. For those who arrive in Rome, the city represents a first step towards a European dream, yet it is experienced as an intermediate stage in a journey that, in many cases, was meant to culminate in London. The unattainability of this destination only intensifies the symbolic power of the London model, charging it with meaning and transforming it into a repertoire of practices, consumption styles, and standards of intra-community prestige. The “social mythology” surrounding the London case – perhaps even more than its actual features – has served as both a narrative and a strategic reference for the community in Rome in its efforts to establish roots and visibility. This mythology is reworked and creatively adapted, becoming a collective resource for negotiating public presence and for constructing new horizons of identity and belonging in the urban space of the capital. All this unfolds in an urban

context that, unlike others, lacks a strong multicultural tradition and public policies oriented towards managing difference. Rome continues to be represented, both from within and from the outside, as the cradle of a white, Italian identity – anchored in an idea of Italianness and of historical-artistic heritage that tends to sweep minorities under the rug and relegate them to a position of institutional and symbolic marginality. The official invisibility of the Bangladeshi community, far from impeding the production of social life or the creation of internal bonds, makes it all the more urgent to understand how concentration, self-organisation, and grassroots forms of public recognition are woven into broader processes of adaptation and collective resistance.

Accordingly, the central questions guiding this research are as follows: What are the causes that have led to such a marked territorial concentration of the Bangladeshi community in Rome, and what effects does this configuration produce on the social and urban fabric and on relations with the majority society? How is the territorial presence of the Bangladeshi community in Rome organised, and what strategies are employed to gain visibility, recognition, and the capacity to resist within the urban space? To what extent do diasporic imaginaries and the constant reference to external models like London reshape settlement practices, paths to inclusion, and the sociality of Bangladeshis in the Roman context? And finally, in what ways does the Roman case of the Bangladeshi diaspora offer an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities and limits of social and legal recognition for second generations in Italian society, and what challenges does it pose with respect to contemporary definitions of citizenship, belonging, and coexistence?

2.2 To understand Rome, look at London

For a long time, migration has been described and experienced as a condition of radical dislocation – a severing of bonds so deep that it consigns the migrant to a kind of existential no-man's-land. Abdelmalek Sayad, in his celebrated metaphor of “double absence”, succeeded in capturing the sense of this disorientation: the emigrant, by definition, finds him- or herself suspended between two worlds. Those who leave cut their ties and end up belonging fully neither to the country of origin nor to the country of arrival, trapped in a state of liminality and non-belonging (Sayad 1999). The community they leave behind often regards them as someone who has “abandoned” the homeland, while the society of arrival struggles to recognise them as one of its own,

relegating them to the margins of citizenship and public life. In his introduction to Sayad's work, Bourdieu describes the migrant as an *atopos*, a peculiar hybrid without a place, who is "lacking" among fellow nationals and "in excess" among natives – thus condemned to a form of inner exile for which there is neither solution nor consolation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000). This paradoxical condition translates both into a sense of guilt towards the homeland and into a feeling of being surplus to requirements in the host society, a kind of perpetual penalty that forces one to live in a constant limbo, caught between illusion and suffering (Sayad 1999). The migrant experience, described in these terms, encapsulates the drama of those who lose familiarity and intimacy with their roots without ever managing to put down new ones elsewhere, left in a void of social recognition. It is no surprise, then, that "double absence" has become such a powerful and widely used interpretative tool in critical literature on migration – a sort of inevitable point of reference for anyone reflecting on the contemporary migrant condition. Yet, for all its heuristic and evocative power, this perspective nonetheless represents only one – however crucial – side of diasporic reality, and risks hardening into a totalising narrative that leaves little space for migrants' agency and subjectivity.

Already from the 1990s onwards, a theoretical revision began to take shape, challenging the idea of the migrant as absent from both worlds. Increasingly, fieldwork has shown that migrants were far from resigned to living in a vacuum of social relations; instead, they actively sought to rebuild their ties, maintaining and sometimes even strengthening connections with their society of origin, even after years of settling elsewhere. Empirical research, as well as migrants' own practices, revealed that many of them, rather than living in a limbo of alienation, were in fact reconstructing active bonds with multiple places at once. What Sayad had identified as "double absence" was gradually reworked in the opposite direction: the migrant could be present, engaged, and active in several places simultaneously, inaugurating what would come to be known as a logic of "double presence". Pioneering transnational studies (Glick Schiller et al. 1992) documented how emigrants maintained, and indeed reinforced, multiple links with their societies of origin, even after settling abroad. The concept of transnationalism was thus defined precisely in terms of the connections and interactions that link people and institutions across national borders (Vertovec 1999). Migrants become transmigrants, taking part in family, economic, social and religious networks that transcend borders and render them present in more than one community

at a time. They end up inhabiting genuine transnational social fields, de-territorialised social spaces in which the traditional here/there dichotomy loses its sharpness (Pries 1999; Ahrens and King 2023). To enter a transnational social field, in fact, means taking on roles and obligations attributable both to the group of origin and to the chosen groups in the host society. In other words, the transnational migrant participates simultaneously in the sociocultural life of the community of origin and in that of the country of settlement, distributing energy and resources on both fronts. Double presence thus becomes not just a theoretical possibility but a concrete strategy of life: the emigrant counters the alienating effects of double absence by reinforcing a dual presence, both here and there. Numerous recent ethnographic studies confirm these practices of counter-conduct: young migrants, for example, invest in marriage, work, and housing projects in their home country, while simultaneously building a future in the country of arrival, constantly striving to transform the condition of absence into full participation on two fronts. Sending remittances to families left behind, building a house in the village of origin, keeping rituals and traditions alive, and at the same time fighting for the recognition of their rights in the host society. As a result, the migrant can no longer be understood as a passive victim of irreparable uprootedness, but as an agentive subject, capable of creatively redefining the boundaries of belonging through relationships that cross national borders.

However, the very concept of double presence has itself come under criticism, with scholars warning against ignoring the fractures, tensions, and discontinuities that persist in diasporic experience. The very notion of transnationalism has come under critical scrutiny, as simultaneity and rupture coexist in the lives of migrants. Pnina Werbner, in particular, has cautioned against imagining the transnational social field as entirely seamless: no matter how frequent the communications and journeys between the country of origin and the country of settlement, over time the gap between the two worlds tends to widen and cannot be entirely bridged (Werbner 2013). When return does occur, it often becomes painfully clear that neither the migrant nor the home country is quite the same as before, and the long-term migrant may experience a sense of painful distance – the mutual transformation that complicates any illusion of perfect continuity. In other words, the optimistic idea of being fully here and there at the same time masks real phenomenological fractures. Intimate mutual knowledge between those who leave and those who remain inevitably erodes with time, and the original community cannot be easily reconstituted after years of separation. And yet, as Werbner notes, it is

precisely in the age of Skype, WhatsApp, and mobile phones that the *illusion* of simultaneity retains extraordinary experiential power. Migrants often live their situation as a tangible transnational co-presence: transborder families, for instance, share daily moments via video calls, and this perception of everyday life together – albeit virtual – nourishes a sense of self and community, even if this mediated proximity does not entirely erase the feeling of absence. Presence and absence coexist in diasporic life, in an unstable balance between integration and loss. The transnational bond thus becomes at once a source of empowerment and of nostalgia: presence is always shadowed by absence, integration by loss, in a balance that is never quite secure. It is precisely this dialectic of rootedness and uprootedness that has spurred new theoretical elaborations on the cultural and identity planes. Many scholars have highlighted the hybrid character of identities in motion, rejecting binary readings that would freeze the here and the elsewhere into fixed oppositions. Following in the footsteps of Homi Bhabha – who already in the 1990s spoke of a “third space” (Bhabha 1994), a cultural space where categories of origin and destination intermix and give rise to new forms – old notions of the migrant suspended between two distinct worlds no longer suffice: the migrant does not experience a static doubling between here and elsewhere, but rather occupies an intermediate space of mutual contamination. What matters, in other words, is not so much a fixed, immutable baggage of culture that the migrant carries along, but rather the necessity for this subject to forge new, mobile, hybrid identities precisely through the experience of movement. This in-between hybridity captures the complexity of lives lived across multiple worlds, encompassing both the desire to maintain roots and the imperative to adapt to a new cultural context. Arrival in the destination country sets in motion a long process of reflection, adaptation, and reaction that can unpredictably reshape one’s sense of self. Bhabha’s concept of the third space has become a paradigm for interpreting these identity trajectories: exile and migration give rise to new, hybrid cultural locations, where binary oppositions are transcended in favour of something different, in-between, neither simply native nor merely exotic (Bhabha 1994; Soja 1996).

Over time, this perspective has been enriched by further nuances, thanks also to increasing attention to forms of vernacular or rooted cosmopolitanism (Bhabha 1996; Werbner 2006). Whereas cosmopolitanism – understood as openness to the world and the ability to move across cultures – was once associated primarily with intellectual elites and great travellers, it is now widely recognised that economic migrants and ordinary workers also

develop a cosmopolitan outlook through their trajectories. They demonstrate openness of mind and an ability to navigate different cultural codes, building solidarities and forms of identification that transcend their context of origin – qualities traditionally seen as the prerogative of the mobile and privileged classes. In this regard, Pnina Werbner (2008) notes that in today's world, marked by ever-increasing mobility, cosmopolitanism is no longer a privilege reserved for the upper classes: even the subaltern may acquire a cosmopolitan consciousness. This approach insists that diaspora can give rise to transnational political imaginaries and new spaces of belonging beyond narrowly national citizenship. Indeed, postcolonial scholars have highlighted how diasporic communities often function as bridges between cultures, enabling connections between social movements and claims that span different contexts. South Asian diasporas, for instance, have sometimes created novel political alliances, as in the case of Indo-American communities in the US, where Hindu nationalists advancing transnational identity agendas coexist with coalitions – Dalit, Muslim, feminist – that use diasporic distance to articulate more plural and critical perspectives on the social order back home (Radhakrishnan and Vijayakumar 2022). In short, theoretical developments have led to a conception of the migrant not only as nostalgic exile or cultural hybrid, but also as a cosmopolitan actor, navigating multiple belongings and participating in communities that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state (Werbner 2008).

In recent years, this multiplication of horizons has become entwined with the emergence of a perspective on diaspora politics which sees migrant communities becoming more and more relevant political actors both in their countries of settlement and in their countries of origin (Adamson 2006). Nation-states have taken note of this reality and increasingly seek to involve their citizens abroad, viewing them as economic, political, and symbolic resources. The extension of voting rights, the creation of ministries for the diaspora, and attention to financial remittances and the circulation of skills are all signs of this new centrality. Yet institutional recognition remains deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, it can strengthen the link between homeland and diaspora, but on the other, it risks instrumentalising overseas communities, turning them into objects of control and patriotic narratives. Practices of political surveillance, the infiltration of online communities, and the use of embassies as centres for the collection and monitoring of expatriates have become tools of a new transnational repression, in which governments extend their reach beyond their own borders, monitoring and intimidating diaspora

dissidents through the Internet (Adamson 2006). It is above all the digital revolution that has radically transformed the forms and modalities of diasporic belonging. The advent of the Internet and social media has triggered the emergence of what can be termed digital diasporas: communities that extend well beyond physical ties and find in online platforms new spaces for connection and expression (Alinejad and Olivieri 2020). It is not easy to define precisely what constitutes a digital diaspora, as scholars speak variously of e-diasporas, net-diasporas, or web-diasporas (Ponzanesi 2020), but it is certain that digital connectivity has profoundly altered the maps of belonging. Today, a young migrant may feel part of a global online community of compatriots, sharing languages, rituals, cultural references, and debates with people scattered across continents – all without losing touch with their everyday life in the society of residence. Digital media have thus subverted the traditional coordinates of space, identity, and community, allowing migrants to “map themselves” within ever more complex global and local networks, escaping the identity closures and territorial constraints of the past. Digital platforms thus become channels for the circulation of images, music, memories, and practical information, while at the same time fostering the creation of an affective community at a distance made of online rituals and affections that traverse space and time, providing new cartographies of the possible for situating one’s identity at the crossroads of multiple places (Diminescu 2008; Ponzanesi 2020). This affective dimension proves central as nostalgia, the desire for belonging, and the search for recognition find in social media an immediate and shared channel capable of giving shape and voice to the deep motivations for migration and to its impact on subjectivity (Madianou 2016; Ponzanesi 2019, 2020).

This leads us to propose a new conceptual approach to interpreting Bangladeshi migration in Rome, which is offered here as the guiding framework for this study. If the notion of “double presence” has thus far represented the main answer to Sayad’s dilemma, the digital era now allows us to speak of what might be termed *multipresence*. In the field of ICT, scholars of media and communication describe multipresence as the capacity to act, interact, and manifest one’s presence in several places – whether physical or virtual – at the same time (Lee and Perry 2001; Gaur and Krishnamoorthy 2018). The technological development of smartphones, permanent connectivity, and immersive virtual environments means that today it is possible to be everywhere: to take part in a work meeting while chatting live with one’s family back home, to follow events and news in real time from

anywhere in the world, to live in a kind of constant switching between multiple real and virtual environments (Gaur and Krishnamoorthy 2018). In the case of diasporas, multipresence further blurs the boundary between life here and life there: the hyper-connected migrant can keep up daily with every small event in their home village, from conversations on Telegram to videos of a local festival on YouTube, without having to step out of their everyday immersion in the host society. The result is a kind of distributed transnationalism, where the migrant's engagement is spread across a multiplicity of global nodes. The diaspora becomes a rhizomatic network: no longer a one-way movement, nor simply a reciprocal double bond, but a web of multiple connections linking different cities, continents, and communities in real time. In this sense, the migrant condition becomes emblematic of what Bauman (1999) calls "liquid modernity", or, as some would say, the post-global era (Pieterse 2018; Flew 2018), an age in which multiple identities, constant mobility, and networked forms of belonging are the rule, not the exception. Thus, interpretive categories have shifted from static images of loss (absence) to metaphors of flow and connection (presence, multipresence). Today, the diaspora is seen as a new form of imagined community (Anderson 1991), dispersed, yet interconnected, a distributed transnational space in which individuals negotiate new, previously unknown balances between local rootedness and global horizons.

To understand how these diasporic models spread and come to structure urban geography, it is useful to recall Stanley Tambiah's concepts of the "galactic polity" and the "mandala". Tambiah (1977) introduced these two notions to describe the ancient spatial configurations of governance in Southeast Asia, in which power and influence were distributed in concentric circles radiating from a royal centre that exerted both symbolic and practical attraction on peripheral nodes. The boundaries between centre and periphery remained fluid, and a peripheral entity could in fact gravitate towards more than one centre at the same time. Applying this idea metaphorically to transnational migratory networks, we can see the global diaspora as a system of decentralised centres and peripheries. In short, certain cities or neighbourhoods where a strong migrant presence has taken root serve as symbolic centres for other nodes in the diaspora. New York, for example, functions as such a centre for the Jewish diaspora (Kivisto 1993; Rock 2012; Waters and Kasinitz 2013; Moor et al. 2017) as well as for the Haitian diaspora (Wah 2004; Ortiz 2009; Pierre-Louis 2013); Los Angeles holds this position for the Mexican diaspora (Shain 1999; Arreola 2004); while Dubai plays a

similar role for many South Asian diasporas (Ali 2010; Errichiello and Nyhagen 2021). These centres attract migrants not only as concrete destinations for settlement, but also as sources of symbolic attention and admiration for those living elsewhere, producing cultural and socio-economic models with a powerful resonance. A Pakistani family in an Italian city, for instance, may look to friends or relatives who have emigrated to London's Southall neighbourhood as a reference point for how a desirable neighbourhood should be organised, with well-managed mosques, Qur'anic schools, halal shops, and a flourishing network of small family-run businesses, and may aspire to recreate, on a smaller scale, that kind of community ecosystem in their own context. Similarly, young Senegalese with entrepreneurial ambitions may look to Paris, where a longstanding and well-established Senegalese community (Sall 2010) demonstrates that opening a business can mean not only economic emancipation but also social recognition and access to a transnational support network. As in Tambiah's mandala (see, among others, Tambiah 2013; Pennock and Power 2018; Andaya 2023), symbolic power – understood as diasporic know-how, reputation for success, and cultural leadership – may be concentrated in certain nodes, but it radiates along migratory trajectories. And just as in the pre-modern mandala, this influence does not travel in a simple one-way, hierarchical relationship: peripheral diasporic communities may themselves reinterpret the models of the centres and may at times connect simultaneously to multiple centres. A Filipino migrant in Rome, for example, may find inspiration both in the Filipino community of Milan, locally considered more consolidated, and in the experiences of relatives in the Philippines or friends in Dubai, thereby constructing a personal mandala of multiple reference points. We can draw on Herzfeld's notion of "global hierarchy of value" to describe the way in which cultures and places are positioned within a worldwide ranking, often according to rhetorics of modernity, development, and cultural capital (Herzfeld 2004). To live in London, or even simply to be able to show that certain aspects of Bangladeshi London have been reproduced in one's own city, confers a status that living in a peripheral town cannot guarantee; and the same dynamic applies to associative, religious, architectural or educational models. The direct effect of this hierarchy may become evident in everyday choices: to open a restaurant, a mosque or a school, following the model of compatriots in London, becomes a declaration of prestige, a form of redemption in response to the sense of inadequacy and marginality that accompanies the diaspora in second-tier cities.

In the specific case of Bangladeshis in Italy, the impossibility of reaching London – which remains for many the symbolic centre and the horizon of aspiration – has not signified the end of the migratory project, but rather its creative conversion and adaptation. Their aspirations are thus relocated to Rome under a condition of multipresence, whereby their cosmopolitan and multi-local self-image, enacted on a multi-local stage, must continuously adjust to the expectations of their compatriots on two fronts: those in the country of origin, and those in the London community. Settlement in Italy thus takes on new meanings: the challenge becomes to demonstrate a successful migratory project even without having reached England, and not to be considered inferior to those who have realised their migratory dream in London. Settlement strategies, residential choices, commercial practices, and the public representation of oneself and one's community all respond to this translocal logic: recognition is sought within a global hierarchy of values, successful models are emulated, and spaces of belonging are constructed that are intended to be legitimate and recognisable not only in Italy, but within the wider constellation of the diaspora. In this way, multipresence, even before being a technological or communicative phenomenon, is realised as an existential and strategic condition: a way of inhabiting the world that crosses boundaries, challenges the separation between here and there, and reinvents migration as an art of the possible in the global era.

2.3 London: colonial legacies and early settlements from Bengal

The earliest traces of migration from the region of Bengal, corresponding to present-day Bangladesh, to the United Kingdom date back to the colonial period. Already in the seventeenth century, during the era of the British Raj, some Bengalis arrived in Britain as so-called *lashkars* or *lascars*, that is sailors and workers on the merchant ships of the East India Company (Adams 1987; Gardner and Shukur 1994; Choudhury 1995). Many of these pioneers came from the Sylhet region in the northeast of what is now Bangladesh, at the time still part of British India (Adams 1987). Disembarking in British ports, primarily London, Liverpool, Cardiff, and Glasgow, some inaugurated the practice known as *ship jumping*, a term used to indicate the act of permanently or temporarily quit their jobs aboard ships (Adams 1987; Siddiqui 2004), often forfeiting wages still owed to them in order to try their luck ashore and settle locally, thus giving rise to the first small communities of South Asian migrants in the port districts. These were, for the most part, single men employed as

stokers in the engine rooms or as stewards on ships, who often stayed only temporarily in England before leaving again; nevertheless, a minority chose to remain permanently, laying the foundations for the future Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain (Adams 1987; Gardner 1995).



Figure 4 Image of a Bangladeshi boatman, painted by Mohammed Ali at the entrance of Brick Lane, personal photo taken in November 2023

These pioneers encouraged others from their homeland to follow them, gradually forming small clusters mainly of men from Sylhet but also from the districts of Noakhali and Chittagong, settling in working-class neighbourhoods of London (especially in the East End) and in other industrial British cities such as Manchester and Birmingham. From the 1920s onwards, a handful of former lascars began to settle in East London, their numbers rising slowly but steadily until 1945. Up to the early 1960s, however, the phenomenon remained demographically limited: in 1962, there were around 6,000 Bengalis in the entire United Kingdom, compared to about 2,000 at the beginning of the 1950s (Peach 1990; Gardner and Shukur

1994). Many of these pioneers provided basic services to fellow countrymen passing through London for periods of rest, renting out rooms and slowly giving rise to the first curry houses, where simple and affordable Bengali food was served (Carey 2004), but also working in tailoring shops, small factories, and textile warehouses in Aldgate and its surroundings. The war years brought unexpected opportunities for these enterprising workers. Between 1940 and 1945, industries in Greater London and the Midlands began to open up to immigrant labour. The most enterprising among them started to move away from London towards Bradford, Birmingham, Coventry, Liverpool and Bristol, gradually finding employment in the textile industry and the metalworking sector (Eade et al. 2006; Priori 2012).

A significant turning point came in the second half of the 1960s and even more markedly in the following decade. On the one hand, the introduction of new British immigration laws, notably, the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill of 1962 and the Immigration Act of 1971, imposed new restrictions on inflows from Commonwealth countries, but at the same time left open the possibility for family reunification (Gardner 1995). On the other hand, the socio-political upheavals that swept across the Indian subcontinent – culminating in the war of liberation and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 – prompted many from eastern Bangladesh to seek economic stability abroad, often relying on the nascent diasporic networks. A first substantial nucleus of Bengali migrants had already formed in London, concentrated above all in the working-class neighbourhood of Spitalfields, in the East End. In the early years, this community was composed as said almost entirely of men, often relatives or fellow villagers, who shared overcrowded lodgings in order to save on costs (Gardner 1993, 1995; Siddiqui 2004; Alexander et al. 2016). As early as 1952, a Pakistan Welfare Association had been established in London, which included migrants from what was then East Pakistan, and after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the first specifically Bangladeshi associations appeared, such as the Federation of Bangladesh Youth Association and the Bangladesh Welfare Association. These organisations provided bureaucratic support, English-language instruction, and assistance to newcomers, acting as the embryo of an infrastructure that would later facilitate family reunifications; in some cases, they also helped people access public funding and even offered employment opportunities (Eade 1991; Eade et al. 2006; Glynn 2006).

The then-East Pakistan war of liberation had direct repercussions in Britain: the community of East Pakistani origin in London actively

participated in demonstrations of solidarity and fundraising campaigns in support of the independence cause. After 1971, these migrants assumed a new national identity as Bangladeshis, distinguishing themselves from Pakistanis and strengthening their community ties. Independence also fuelled new migratory flows: some exiled Bengali activists and intellectuals remained in London, and, above all, many men already resident began to bring over their wives and children from Bangladesh as soon as possible. Although the numbers remained modest in the years immediately following the civil war, the beginning of family chain migration was destined to profoundly transform the composition of the British Bangladeshi community (Gardner 1995; Eade et al. 2006; Glynn 2006). The result was a marked increase in immigration to Britain throughout the 1970s (Adams 1987). The available data show an exponential rise: new annual arrivals climbed from 5,508 in 1972 to 24,000 by 1980 (Peach 1990). During these years, the Bangladeshi community in Britain progressively ceased to be made up solely of *sojourners*, temporary workers with plans to return home, and instead moved towards permanent settlement. Many men, who had initially migrated alone, were able to bring over their families thanks to the provisions for family reunification: as a result, thousands of Bangladeshi women and children arrived in London and other British cities in the second half of the 1970s, transforming what had been a transient presence into a stable, territorially rooted community. This transition from a predominantly male and temporary migration to permanent family settlement is also documented by census figures. The 1981 British census, the first in which Bangladeshis were recorded as a separate national group, registered 48,517 people of Bangladeshi origin residing in Britain, of whom around 16,000 had been born in the UK (Peach 1990; Siddiqui 2004). These numbers marked a clear increase over previous decades and attested to the consolidation of a new migrant group. By the 2001 census, the British population of Bangladeshi origin had grown by a further hundred thousand, reaching approximately 300,000 individuals (ONS UK 2012–2014). In short, the majority of British citizens of Bangladeshi descent now resident in the United Kingdom are not descended from the handful of colonial-era *lascar*, but from the post-1970s migration waves, concentrated in the two decades following Bangladesh's independence. The common narrative that traces the entire British Bangladeshi diaspora back to the Sylheti seamen of the early twentieth century is therefore historiographically inaccurate, but it has undoubtedly played a symbolic role in providing the community with a unifying and noble

origin myth – through the ideal link with the veteran lascar and, retrospectively, with the ancient Sufi figures who brought Islam to Bengal (see Adamson 1987; Gardner 1995; Alexander et al. 2016).

By the late 1970s, the Bangladeshi presence in London, still concentrated for the most part in the working-class neighbourhoods of the East End, had grown in both numbers and visibility. This process, however, unfolded in a social climate shaped by poverty and widespread racism. Many of the newcomers from Bangladesh found themselves in low-status, poorly paid jobs – most commonly in the textile factories of Brick Lane, as labourers in local industries, or in the long and gruelling shifts of restaurant work. Living conditions were often extremely difficult: it was not uncommon for entire families to share a single run-down flat, a consequence of the chronic shortage of decent and affordable housing in the area (Eade 1991; Alexander et al. 2016). Within these same working-class districts, the local white population, already battered by economic crisis and high unemployment, tended to regard the new arrivals with suspicion and resentment, accusing them of taking jobs and homes. The result was a climate in which Bangladeshi immigrants became frequent targets of aggression and racial intolerance. Despite later memories that would sometimes portray those years as an era of relatively untroubled coexistence, the presence of non-white populations in postwar Britain had, since the 1950s, sparked growing anxiety and gradually become a focal point of national debate (Alexander et al. 2016). The crucial contribution of Commonwealth migrants to Britain's economic recovery after the war did little to dispel the negative narratives circulating in the media and among political leaders, who often framed immigration as a social problem rather than an opportunity. The anti-Black riots that shook Nottingham and London in 1958 were widely interpreted as signs of a growing “racial problem”, although historical analyses make clear that such tensions had their roots mainly in the prejudices of the white majority. The climate of alarm surrounding the so-called “race question” continued to intensify throughout the 1960s, reaching a climax with public interventions such as Enoch Powell's notorious speech, which further polarised opinion and consolidated political support for tighter immigration controls (Gardner 1995). In the East End, far-right groups like the National Front openly incited hatred against Asian minorities. Bangladeshis, who were still often indiscriminately labelled as “Pakistani” or “Indian” by the local population, suffered frequent attacks: they were assaulted in the streets, their homes and shops vandalised, and their presence made precarious by the

constant threat of violence. Young Bangladeshis returning home from work were sometimes attacked by xenophobic gangs, while the windows of the few Asian-owned businesses on Brick Lane became regular targets for bricks and stones thrown by local thugs (Eade 1989; Fuscoe et al. 2022). This dark period reached its apex in the second half of the 1970s, when episodes of racist violence repeatedly threatened the safety and cohesion of the entire community.

The most dramatic episode during this period was the murder of Altab Ali. On the evening of 4 May 1978, Altab Ali, a young Bangladeshi textile worker, was walking home from work, crossing St. Mary's Park in Whitechapel, when he was attacked and fatally stabbed by sympathisers of the National Front (Eade et al. 2006; Alexander et al. 2016; Fuscoe et al. 2022). This tragic event profoundly shocked the local Bangladeshi community and marked a watershed in its history in Britain. The response was immediate: that very night, community leaders and young activists gathered to decide how to react, realising that it was no longer possible to passively endure the escalation of violence. In the days that followed, thousands of people, Bangladeshis as well as British anti-racist allies, took to the streets to protest against racism and demand protection. Altab Ali's funeral became a mass demonstration of solidarity, and from that moment onwards, the community began to organise itself more effectively to defend its rights (Alexander et al. 2016; Fuscoe et al. 2022).

The murder of Altab Ali became a symbol of resistance for all Bangladeshis in the UK. In its wake, new Bangladeshi youth movements emerged, such as the Bangladesh Youth Movement, set up to patrol the streets and protect local residents from racist attacks, often in collaboration with British anti-fascist groups (Eade 1989). This climate of mobilisation also led to concrete political results: the community began to forge a stable alliance with the local Labour Party, traditionally strong in the East End and committed to anti-National Front campaigns. The Bangladeshis understood that in order to secure safety and resources, they needed to have a voice in local institutions; as a result, they actively participated in campaigns to elect BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) councillors in the Tower Hamlets wards. This approach, described by John Eade as a "community politics", involved ethnic self-organisation to claim access to social housing, funding for youth centres, and anti-racist measures (Eade 1989; Eade et al. 2006).



Figure 5 One of the original posters that appeared on the streets of Whitechapel after the murder of Altab Ali, shown to me in November 2023 by Kazi Ruksana Begum, Arts Development Officer for the Borough of Tower Hamlets

Thanks to this strategy, from the 1980s onwards, the local authorities of Tower Hamlets began to officially recognise the Bangladeshi presence, consulting community leaders and allocating resources to dedicated projects (Gardner and Shukur 1994). The 1970s, then, were marked by a clear dichotomy between exclusion and reaction. On the one hand, Bangladeshis experienced segregation in some of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods, suffering systematic violence and discrimination; on the other, a new generation of activists and residents emerged, determined to claim their place within British society and to turn those neighbourhoods into a home for the diaspora (Alexander et al. 2016). Between 1976 and 1981, the Bangladeshi population of Tower Hamlets doubled, and the aforementioned shift from a community of single men to one that included women and children (Gardner 1993, 1995) contributed to the pressing demands for inclusive schools, adequate housing, and cultural protection. At the same time, the Bangladeshi community of the East End began to define its diasporic identity with greater clarity. In 1976, the synagogue on the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street was purchased to become the Jamme

Masjid, also known as the Brick Lane Mosque. Markers such as the Bengali language and the commemoration of Bangladesh's national history became increasingly significant: as early as 1971, a first temporary Shahid Minar (monument to the martyrs of the Language Movement) had been erected in London, and by the late 1980s discussions were underway about installing a permanent one. This monument – finally realised in the 1990s and located not far from the place where Altab Ali was killed, in St. Mary's Park, which in 1998 was officially renamed in his memory as a lasting tribute to the fight against racism – commemorates those who died in the 1952 Language Movement in Dhaka and is a symbolic replica of the original in Bangladesh. Its presence in East London testifies to a strong transnational connection: every year, on 21 February (Language Martyrs' Day), many British Bangladeshis lay wreaths there, re-enacting a national ritual some 8,000 kilometres away (Alexander et al. 2016; Fuscoe et al. 2022)¹². In other words, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Bangladeshi diaspora in London was forging a collective memory grounded both in local experience (the anti-racist resistance around the figure of Altab Ali) and in references to the history and culture of Bangladesh (the language, the war of liberation), thus shaping a hybrid British-Bengali identity.

By the end of the 1970s, the Bangladeshi community in London had laid solid institutional and social foundations for future generations. The concentration in Tower Hamlets, due both to socio-economic marginalisation and access to social housing, created a communal space that, at least, offered a bit of security. Brick Lane and the surrounding area became the nerve centre of what would later be labelled Banglatown: a neighbourhood dotted with curry houses, sari shops, halal butchers and jewellery stores, where Bengali was spoken alongside English and something of a "Little Bangladesh" took shape in the heart of the East End (Fremaux and Garbin 2002; Shaw and Bagwell 2012; Priori 2013). On the political front, the

¹² The rupture between East and West Pakistan originated in 1947, when, following Partition, two territories separated by 1,600 kilometres of India were united into a single state, politically and militarily dominated by Islamabad despite the clear Bengali-speaking majority in the east. The imposition of Urdu as the sole official language was perceived in Dhaka as a form of internal colonisation and sparked the Language Movement: students and intellectuals demanded that Bengali be granted equal status. On 21 February 1952, in defiance of a ban on public assembly, thousands of young people marched towards the provincial parliament; police opened fire, killing four university students (Abul Barkat, Abdul Jabbar, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Shafiur Rahman) and a nine-year-old boy, Ohi Ullah, who would later be revered as "language martyrs". That bloodshed cemented a distinct national identity and fuelled demands for autonomy which, in the face of Islamabad's military repression (Operation Searchlight, March 1971), erupted into a war of independence supported by India. The capitulation of the Pakistani army in Dhaka on 16 December 1971 marked the birth of Bangladesh, but it left behind a collective trauma of violence, mass displacement, and political instability that continues to mark the country to this day (Van Schendel 2009; Alexander et al. 2016).

elections of 6 May 1982 marked an important landmark, as the first Bangladeshi councillors of Tower Hamlets were elected, the independent Nurul Haque and Labour's Ashik Ali (Fuscoe et al. 2022). From a community of problematically visible workers, the British-Bangladeshis of the East End had become an active political and cultural subject, ready to fully claim a place in British society.

At the same time, de-industrialisation was taking its toll on the local textile economy, and in a 1987 ranking based on four deprivation indicators, Spitalfields emerged as the poorest ward in London. Funds were then allocated to refurbish commercial activities (particularly the famous Brick Lane curry restaurants) and improve the urban decor: new neon signs in both Bengali and English coloured the streets, distinctive architectural elements such as the large “Bangladeshi-style” decorative arch at the entrance to Brick Lane were installed, and street signs became bilingual, with names also given in Bengali script. Behind this operation of urban rebranding was the concerted action of Bangladeshi-origin business and political elites: around the turn of the millennium, some local councillors and entrepreneurs (often of the second generation) promoted an urban regeneration project aimed at enhancing the cultural heritage of the neighbourhood. These interventions aimed to construct the image of a cosmopolitan, picturesque, and “exotic” neighbourhood, capable of attracting tourist and commercial flows. For a comprehensive overview of London’s Banglatown, see Briata 2007 and Fioretti and Briata 2018. From the 1990s onwards, the Brick Lane–Spitalfields neighbourhood began to be externally recognised as “Banglatown”, a name echoing that of Chinatown and underlining the area’s ethnic and cultural connotation. The use of the term Banglatown became official when, during the 2002 local elections, Tower Hamlets Council decided to rename the ward “Spitalfields and Banglatown” (Shaw and Bagwell 2012). The initiative succeeded in creating a flourishing ethnic economy. Thanks to Banglatown’s reputation, Brick Lane became a well-known destination for Londoners and tourists alike, drawn by its Indian/Bangladeshi restaurants, fabric shops, and ethnic spice and jewellery stores. Bestselling books set in the neighbourhood – most notably Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane* (2003), which was later adapted into a film – helped to spread the image of the area as an emblematic site of the Bangladeshi diaspora and London’s multiculturalism worldwide (Brouillette 2009; Alexander 2011; Fioretti and Briata 2018).

However, not all members of the community benefited equally from this transformation. The alliance promoting the “Banglatown” brand represented the interests of specific groups as restaurateurs, shopkeepers and local politicians, whose priorities did not necessarily coincide with those of the wider Bangladeshi population. The spectacularisation and crystallisation of a selected small portion of Bangladeshi culture, while making Brick Lane fashionable and attractive, inevitably produced ambivalent effects. During the years, rising rents and tourist pressure have made the area increasingly expensive and crowded, prompting the closure or relocation of traditional businesses that did not fit with the neighbourhood’s new commercial brand. Moreover, the arrival of new residents from the so-called creative class (Florida 2002) and real estate investors has triggered processes of gentrification that disrupted established local community geographies. Paradoxically, just as Brick Lane is celebrated as a successful example of multiculturalism, the original Bangladeshi community faces unprecedented challenges: defending the social and residential spaces won by the first generations, which are now threatened by commercial homogenisation and the pressures of the property market (Brouillette 2009; Alexander 2011; Rasinger 2018; Fioretti and Briata 2018).



Figure 6 An example of the controversial street art that now dots Brick Lane, personal photograph taken in September 2023

2.3.1 Current Socio-Economic Configurations in the East End

In recent years, the Bangladeshi community in London has further consolidated itself demographically, even as it continues to face significant socio-economic disadvantages. According to the 2021 Census for England and Wales, those identifying as of Bangladeshi origin number 644,900 individuals, equivalent to 1.1% of the population. This represents a substantial increase compared to the 2011 Census, when approximately 447,000 Bangladeshis were recorded, reflecting both the contribution of new generations born in Britain and further waves of migration since the 2010s. Roughly half of this population resides in the Greater London area, which remains the principal centre of settlement: the capital alone is home to about 322,000 British Bangladeshis. Internally, however, their distribution across the city is not uniform: the Bangladeshi community remains highly concentrated in the East End. In particular, the borough of Tower Hamlets – which includes Spitalfields, Whitechapel and the areas surrounding Brick Lane – has the highest percentage of Bangladeshi residents of any London borough: as much as 34.6% of the Tower Hamlets population identifies as Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi. The Bangladeshi population of London is also now largely British-born: in Tower Hamlets, for instance, only 14% of residents were born in Bangladesh, an indicator of the transition to second and third generations born on British soil (ONS 2023; Gov.uk 2024). This generational shift has important implications for the community's social and cultural dynamics. Other sizable Bangladeshi communities are found in the adjacent eastern boroughs of Newham and Barking & Dagenham (ONS 2023; Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024), while in many peripheral districts the Bangladeshi presence is minimal. This pattern confirms a previously observed characteristic: unlike other Asian groups (such as Pakistanis, who are more dispersed across the city), Bangladeshis maintain a strong community core in East London.

In terms of housing, Bangladeshi Londoners still exhibit above-average levels of deprivation. One striking figure concerns domestic overcrowding: nearly one in five Bangladeshi households (18%) live in overcrowded conditions, meaning homes with too many occupants for the available rooms (ONS 2023; Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024). This rate is the second highest among all ethnic groups and is dramatically higher than the citywide average (2.9%). Such overcrowding reflects the reality of extended families and limited economic resources, often obliging multiple

family members to share small flats. The situation is worsened by the chronic shortage of affordable housing in London; as a result, the Bangladeshi community makes extensive use of the public housing sector. Approximately 40% of British Bangladeshis reside in social housing (council or housing association flats), a much higher proportion than other South Asian groups, and seven times higher than for Indians (just 5 percent in social housing) or Pakistanis (18 percent) (ONS 2023). Access to council housing has historically been crucial for low-income Bangladeshi families: in the 1980s, entire blocks of council flats in the East End were allocated to Bengali migrants as a result of anti-racist activism. It should be noted that a significant share of Bangladeshi families have over time managed to purchase their own homes, benefiting from favourable schemes or from the upward mobility of some members, often offspring born in the UK who contribute with professional employment). Nevertheless, home ownership remains below average: Tower Hamlets records the lowest rate of home ownership in all of England (around 23%), a sign that the Bangladeshi community continues to face persistent socio-economic vulnerability in terms of housing (ONS 2023; London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024).

With regard to employment and economic conditions, the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom has made significant progress in recent years, even though persistent inequalities remain when compared to other groups. Historically, Bangladeshis in Britain experienced high rates of unemployment and were strongly concentrated in low-skilled sectors such as catering, small-scale manufacturing, and street trading. Today, the picture has become more nuanced. The overall unemployment rate for British Bangladeshis remains higher than the national average, but it has declined markedly compared to the past. Recent data show that in 2022 the combined unemployment rate for economically active Bangladeshis and Pakistanis was around 9 percent, above the national average of about 4 percent but lower of the 18 percent of 2013. From 2004 to 2022, the employment rate of the combined ethnic group passed from 44 percent to 61 percent. Although the gap has not disappeared, it has nonetheless narrowed substantially over the past decades, indicating a gradual process of integration into the labour market (ONS 2023).

Alongside this, there has been a notable upward shift in the occupational profile of the second generation: increasing numbers of young people of Bangladeshi origin are now entering skilled jobs in the tertiary sector, such as financial services, public administration, education,

healthcare, in contrast to their parents, many of whom worked as factory labourers or in the catering industry. Nevertheless, challenges persist. On the one hand, a considerable portion – particularly first-generation Bangladeshi women – remains outside the labour market, often due to the demands of family care: in Tower Hamlets, it is estimated that more than 46,000 adults, mostly women of South Asian origin, have never engaged in paid employment (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024). On the other hand, even among those who are employed, average earnings for Bangladeshis remain lower than the national mean, owing to continued concentration in low-wage sectors (such as ethnic catering, retail, and transport) and the persistence of pay discrimination. Recent research demonstrates that, even when education and position are held constant, Bangladeshi workers tend to earn less than their white British counterparts, highlighting the continued existence of systemic barriers in the labour market. Moreover, only a minority of Bangladeshis in the UK belong to the highest income bands: less than 5 percent of Bangladeshi families are in the top income quintile nationally, compared to almost 25 percent of Indian households (Mirza and Warwick 2024). These disparities show that, although the second generation is achieving important educational successes, full intergenerational economic mobility has yet to be realised.

One area where the Bangladeshi community has made striking progress is in education. From the 2000s to the present, young British Bangladeshis have experienced a genuine educational success story. Fifteen years ago, Bangladeshi students in England lagged behind the average: for example, in 2005, the proportion of Bangladeshi pupils achieving a strong pass in the GCSE exams (the national school-leaving qualifications) in core subjects such as English and mathematics was roughly ten percentage points lower than among their white British peers. Today, the situation is reversed: Bangladeshi students now outperform their white peers by around five percentage points in securing top GCSE grades (ONS 2023; Mirza and Warwick 2024). This shift is evidence of a new generation, born and educated in the United Kingdom, that has benefited from a family environment often highly attentive to education as a means of social advancement. Not only are more Bangladeshi children successfully completing compulsory education, but increasing numbers are continuing to higher education: in 2019, for example, young Bangladeshis in England were 27 percentage points more likely to go on to university than their white British contemporaries (ONS 2023; Mirza and Warwick 2024). This

remarkable trend has prompted some commentators and analysts to speak of a model of educational integration¹³ for British Bangladeshis.

However, it should be stressed that excellent educational outcomes do not always translate into equal opportunities in the labour market, due to the persistent barriers already mentioned. Moreover, there are still challenges in linguistic and cultural integration for newly arrived children: in the primary and secondary schools of Tower Hamlets and Newham, for example, the majority of pupils have Bengali (specifically Sylheti) as their first language, and schools have had to set up special support programmes for the acquisition of English. Taken as a whole, however, young Bangladeshis in London are now showing a clear pattern of upward social mobility driven by educational achievement: many are entering skilled professions as engineers, doctors, teachers and public sector employees, helping to give shape to an increasingly visible British Bangladeshi middle class.

2.4 Rome: Urban Development and Migration Dynamics

As the capital of Italy, Rome enjoys a unique administrative status officially defined as “Roma Capitale”¹⁴. The municipal administration is led by a Mayor, an Executive Committee (Giunta), and a City Assembly (Assemblea Capitolina, or City Council). Since 2013, the municipal territory has been subdivided into 15 Municipi, local administrative districts, each with its own elected President and Municipal Council, as well as delegated powers. This reorganization, which reduced the previous number of 19 municipi, was intended to bring local government closer to the residents, providing the Municipi with a degree of managerial and financial autonomy, along with authority over local services (such as registry offices, urban maintenance, housing of local interest, neighbourhood economic development, and more).

¹³ As appeared on a 2022 The Economist article: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/11/24/british-bangladeshis-are-doing-astonishingly-well-at-school>.

¹⁴ Roma Capitale is a territorial entity endowed with a special legal framework, established in accordance with Article 114, paragraph three, of the Italian Constitution. This status grants the city a particular degree of administrative and financial autonomy, as defined by Law no. 42 of 5 May 2009 and subsequent legislative decrees, in particular Legislative Decree no. 156 of 17 September 2010. In practice, Roma Capitale has the authority to adopt its own statute, approved by the City Assembly (Assemblea Capitolina), which sets out the organization and functioning of the institution. Rome is thus entrusted with administrative powers that go beyond those of ordinary municipalities, including the enhancement and protection of historical and artistic heritage, urban planning, mobility, civil protection, and the management of major events. The institutional structure is characterized by a high degree of decentralization: each Municipio enjoys administrative and financial autonomy in the management of local services. Meanwhile, the City Assembly, the Executive Committee, and the Mayor retain strategic responsibilities and the general direction of policy.

The Municipi correspond to the city's main territorial subdivisions; for statistical purposes, the municipal area is further broken down into 155 urban zones. Rome also serves as the centre of the Metropolitan City of Roma Capitale, an administrative unit that includes dozens of surrounding municipalities and, as of 2023, counts more than 4.2 million inhabitants (ISTAT 2023), making it the most populous metropolitan area in Italy.

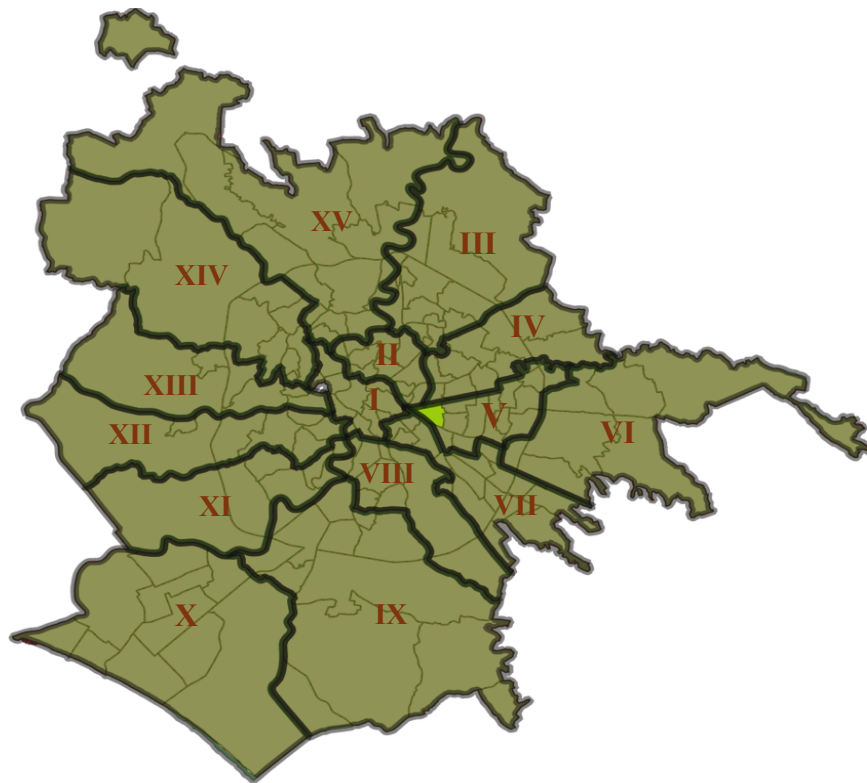


Figure 7 Map of the 15 Municipi of Rome (thick borders) and the corresponding 155 Urban Zones (thin borders). In light green, the Urban Zone (06A) corresponding to Torpignattara, located within the Municipio V

Rome has a long history of migration, which for much of the twentieth century was shaped above all by internal movements within Italy, and only in recent decades by flows from abroad. After 1870, when Rome became the seat of the national government, thousands of civil servants, construction workers, and unskilled labourers arrived from both northern and southern regions to take part in building the new Italian capital and to seek work opportunities. During the Fascist era and in the decades following the Second World War, Rome's population was further swelled by newcomers from the South and the North-East, many of whom settled in the city's fast-growing

working-class suburbs. Official “borgate” such as Pietralata, Prenestino, Tiburtino and others were built to house migrants displaced by the demolition of central neighbourhoods during the Fascist period, while informal settlements like Torpignattara sprang up spontaneously, absorbing successive waves of internal migrants. From the 1920s onwards, for example, many families from Abruzzo, rural Lazio, and southern Italian regions settled in Torpignattara, often working in the local factories and construction sites. This rapid and poorly planned expansion left a lasting mark on the city’s urban fabric: alongside the monumental historic centre, vast areas of peripheral dormitory neighbourhoods developed, often lacking in basic services (Ferrarotti 1970; Ficacci 2007; Insolera and Berdini 2023).

Until the 1970s, then, Rome was primarily perceived as a magnet for Italians from other regions, drawn by jobs in the civil service, construction, or domestic work. From the 1980s onwards, however, in parallel with Italy’s broader transformation into a country of immigration, Rome began to receive increasingly substantial communities of foreign nationals. In an initial phase, these arrivals often included people with particular statuses: for instance, Catholic students and religious workers from the Philippines and Latin America, as early as the 1970s, or political refugees such as Chileans after the 1973 coup and Eritreans and Ethiopians linked to the Italian diaspora. But it was above all the influx of migrant workers in the 1980s and 1990s that reshaped the city’s social landscape. Rome saw the rapid growth of communities such as the Filipinos – employed as domestic workers for affluent families and religious institutions, with tens of thousands already resident by the early 1990s, organised around Catholic parishes and especially present in domestic service. At the same time, other Asian and African groups grew: Indians and Sri Lankans often worked in catering or as street vendors; Chinese, concentrated in the Esquilino area, became active in small business; while a historic Somali community, as well as Ethiopians and Eritreans, some originally present for study and later settled, continued to expand. The 1990s were a decisive period. Following the first regularisation schemes – such as the 1990 amnesty discussed above – many previously temporary presences became permanent. By 1991, more than 50,000 foreign nationals were officially resident in Rome; by 2001, this number had exceeded 100,000; by 2023, it had reached 390,711, representing 13.9% of the city’s total population (ISTAT and City of Rome data, 2023). Today, the largest groups are Romanians (steadily the largest national group in Italy

since Romania joined the EU in 2007), followed by Filipinos, Bangladeshis, and Chinese.

This transformation has made the city of Rome an increasingly cosmopolitan space, albeit with characteristics distinct from other major European capitals. The Roman urban fabric is less industrial and more oriented towards the tertiary and informal service sectors; as a result, migrants have found work mainly in domestic service, street commerce, catering, and small businesses, rather than in manufacturing, which has always played a marginal role in Rome. At the same time, while the city's central districts began to lose population from the 1970s onwards as a consequence of strong processes of touristification and the subsequent centrifugal residential shifts, the suburban rings and metropolitan hinterland continued to grow, reflecting a partial relocation of the population towards more accessible urban areas. Within the space of a few decades, Rome has shifted from being a dual metropolis, composed of a monumental centre and a working-class periphery within the ring road, to a polycentric and socio-culturally heterogeneous city, with significant migrant communities now fully integrated into its urban fabric (Lelo et al. 2019).

2.4.1 Bangladeshi migration to Rome

Bangladeshi immigration to Italy is far more recent than the flows that reached the United Kingdom, and must be read against the backdrop of globalisation and of the turning points that have reshaped European migration policy over the past few decades (Knights 1996). Until the 1970s the Bangladeshi presence in Italy remained marginal: Bangladesh had no colonial or historical links with the country, and those who left Dhaka usually looked northwards to continental Europe or eastwards to the Gulf in search of work (King & Knights 1998).

The first destination of choice was West Germany, where Bangladeshi citizens could still secure political asylum with relative ease in the years of turbulence that followed the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan and the subsequent power struggles in the new state, including the 1975 coup that installed the military regime of Ziaur Rahman and led to the summary execution of alleged opponents (Van Schendel 2009; Priori 2012; Della Puppa 2014). More than a thousand Bangladeshis gained refugee status during that decade, until the 1979 revisions to German legislation redirected flows to other European countries (Knights & King 1998). France then took

over as the main pole of attraction. The election of the socialist François Mitterrand in 1981 nourished expectations of regularisation measures and drew several hundred Bangladeshi migrants to the country. French rules, which were more permissive than those adopted at the time in Switzerland or Germany, kept France at the top of the list until 1989, when the appointment of Charles Pasqua as Minister of the Interior brought that window of relative openness to an end (Priori 2012). The two-year span 1989–1990 marked a watershed. French restrictions, coupled with the outbreak of the First Gulf War, closed the route to the oil states and prompted many Bangladeshis to turn towards the former Soviet republics and the Mediterranean. Once state socialism collapsed, those republics opened their doors to foreign labour. To Bangladeshi eyes they offered fresh spaces in which to deploy entrepreneurial skills and flexible mobility strategies, fostering small business enclaves in cities such as Moscow and Kyiv. Ties between Bangladesh and the Eastern Bloc, in fact, stretched back to the 1970s, when governments in Dhaka that leaned toward a socialist orientation had strengthened relations with Warsaw-Pact nations by sponsoring scholarship programmes. Each year, thousands of Bangladeshi students travelled to the Soviet Union or other socialist countries to study, and many chose to stay on, laying the foundations for small yet enduring communities (Priori 2012). The downturn that followed the demise of state socialism, coupled with a sharp rise in xenophobic aggression, soon encouraged many Bangladeshis to redirect their journeys toward Spain, Greece and, above all, Italy, where border controls were comparatively less stringent (Knights & King 1998; Quattrocchi 2003). Consequently, while Bangladeshi settlement in north-central Europe remained marginal, numbers within the Mediterranean began to expand at an appreciable pace.

In 1987 only a few hundred Bangladeshis resided in Rome, the first Italian city to host a sizeable contingent. They were almost exclusively young men, some arriving after extended periods in West Germany, France, the Netherlands or Greece; others came from the Gulf, principally Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where they had worked on temporary contracts. Growth thereafter proved striking. By the late 1990s the Bangladeshi population in Italy stood at roughly 12 000, and by the early 2000s the figure had reached about 70 000, compared with 7 000 in Spain and 11 000 in Greece (Siddiqui 2004; Priori 2012). During the transitional years straddling the 1990s and 2000s the collectivity acquired a more clearly defined internal structure. Many newly regularised migrants entered low-

skill niches such as cleaning services, street vending, manual labour in wholesale markets, and employment in small construction or manufacturing firms. Rome, in particular, offered opportunities in informal commerce and urban services: Bangladeshi vendors of flowers, umbrellas and souvenirs rapidly became an almost emblematic feature of the historic centre (Knights 1996; Priori 2012; Piazzoni 2021). Most, however, contended with precarious work and modest wages, sharing cramped rented rooms to reduce expenses. At this stage the population was still predominantly single and male; family reunification rates remained low, hindered by fragile economic and housing circumstances.

A further influx followed the large-scale regularisations introduced in mid '90s such as the Dini and Turco-Napolitano laws, which granted long-term residence permits to undocumented migrants already in the country and, indirectly, to more recent arrivals. Possession of secure documentation facilitated both a measure of socio-economic stability and the subsequent sponsorship of spouses and children. Once regularised, many Bangladeshis relocated from Rome to other Italian cities in pursuit of improved employment and living conditions, above all to the industrialised North and North-East. Milan, Bologna, Padua, Venice and Vicenza thus emerged as new poles of settlement (Priori 2012; Della Puppa 2014). In these areas labour was required in textile workshops, on construction sites, in retail, and in seasonal street trading in tourist destinations (rose and trinket sellers found in Italian piazzas are, to a considerable extent, Bangladeshi). In many instances the Roman community served as a springboard: after securing documents in the capital, migrants moved elsewhere while maintaining close ties with relatives and friends who had remained, thereby establishing an extensive nationwide network. This internal diaspora has produced a far-reaching Bangladeshi presence across Italy. Rome continues to host roughly one quarter of the total, yet well-established and highly visible communities are now found throughout the principal northern regions, with the Veneto standing out as a major centre.

Today the metropolitan area of the city of Rome accommodates the largest Bangladeshi community within the continental European Union, as the United Kingdom now lies outside the EU framework. According to the most recent report issued by the Ministry of Labour, 39,658 Bangladeshi nationals, approximately one quarter of the countrywide total, reside in the metropolitan area (Ministero del Lavoro 2023; Comune di Roma 2023). The great majority live inside the municipal boundaries (35.233), and their

settlement is highly concentrated in the eastern and south-eastern municipi. Municipio V – which includes the neighbourhoods of Torpignattara, Prenestino, Centocelle and Pigneto – constitutes the principal hub, with 10,154 registered residents of Bangladeshi citizenship. In the single urban zone of Torpignattara alone, 3,311 Bangladeshis are recorded, amounting to 7% of the local population and 30% of all foreign residents in that zone (Comune di Roma 2023).

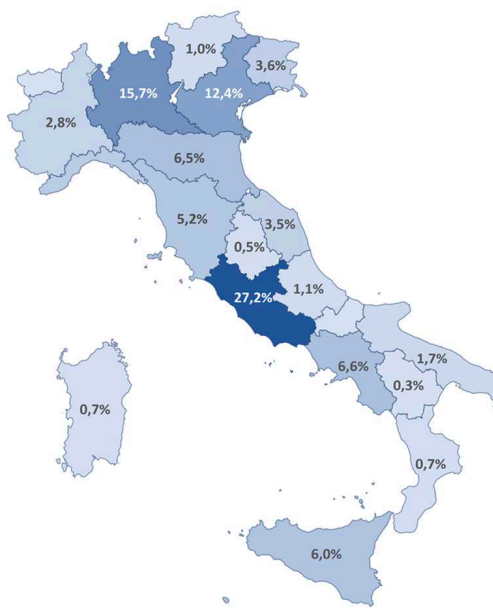


Figure 8 Distribution of the Bangladeshi population legally residing in Italy in 2022. Source: Ministero del Lavoro 2023

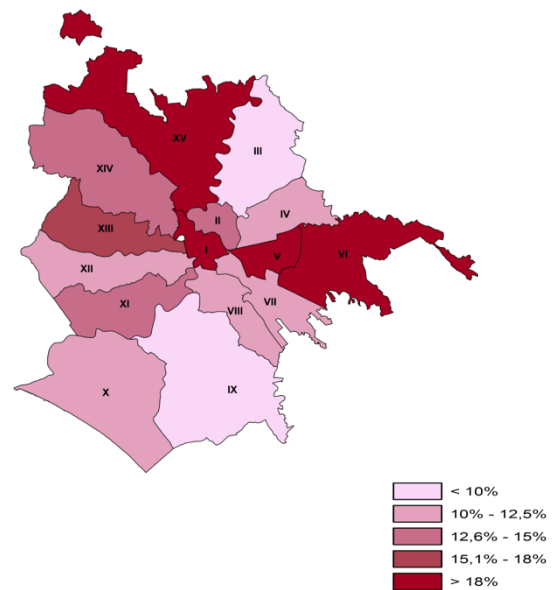


Figure 9 Foreign population in Rome by district in 2022 (in %). Source: Comune di Roma 2022

The geographical distribution of enterprises headed by Bangladesh-born proprietors closely mirrors this residential pattern. Lazio hosts 39.4% of all Bangladeshi-led self-managed enterprises, followed by Campania (14%) and Lombardy (11.5%). At the provincial scale, the concentration is even clearer: 39% of such firms are located in the province of Rome, where one-third of all non-EU sole proprietorships are directed by Bangladeshi citizens.

Within the metropolitan area, 55.5% of EU nationals who hold corporate offices are Romanian; Spanish and French citizens follow at 8.2% and 6.8% respectively. Among non-EU nationals, by contrast, Bangladeshis constitute the largest group (25.7%), ahead of Chinese (10.8%) and Egyptians (8.9%) (Comune di Roma 2022). Commerce is the community's dominant field of activity, with 63.5% of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs operating in retail or

wholesale trade, compared to the 39.9% of the non-EU population as a whole. Business-service activities form the second sector of investment (11.4% versus 6.2% among other non-EU entrepreneurs). Their presence is likewise notable in information and communication technology services: the 569 Bangladeshi-run ICT firms represent roughly one-sixth of all non-EU sole proprietorships in the sector (Ministero del Lavoro 2023).

With 241,165 inhabitants, Municipio V is Rome's second most populous district, though third from last in territorial extent (26.92 km²); its population density, with 8,958 inhabitants per square kilometre, is consequently the city's highest. Over recent decades the area has undergone marked demographic change driven by inward migration. Foreign nationals now represent 18.3% of residents, a proportion exceeded only in Municipio VI (18.9%), where comparatively inexpensive housing attracts a large Romanian community, and in Municipio I (21.4%), whose concentration of foreign citizens can be explained also including in the count the fact that more than 130 embassies and consulates, together with the headquarters of international organisations such as FAO, draw diplomatic and institutional persone to live in the area. Moreover, since 2002 the City of Rome has assigned a formal "virtual address" (Via Modesta Valenti) to persons without fixed abode. House-number 1, managed by Municipio I, receives the majority of new registrations.

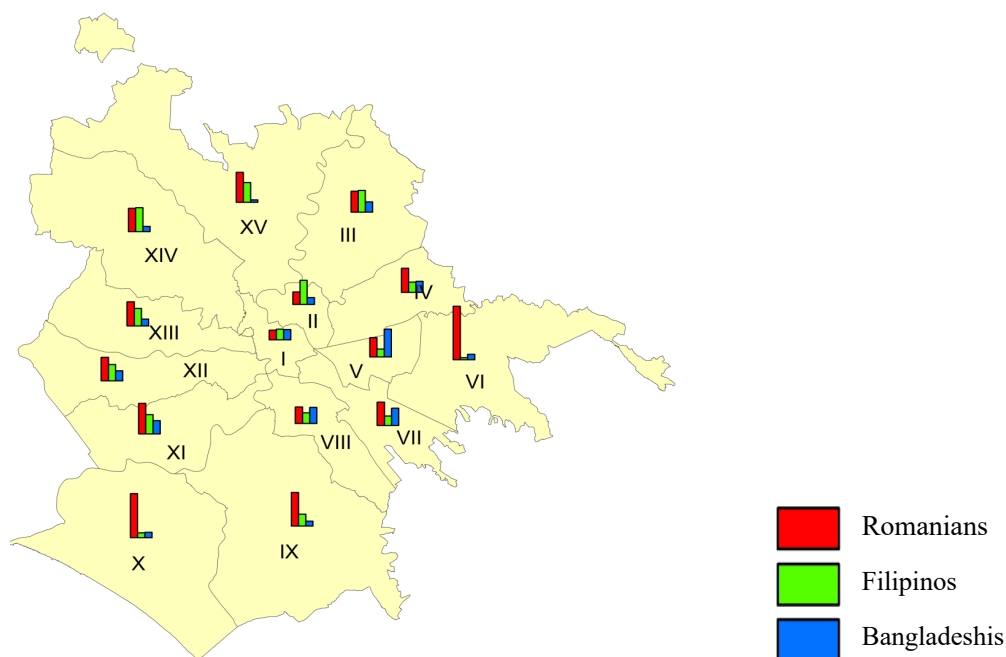


Figure 10 Top three foreign groups per district in Rome in 2022. Source: Comune di Roma 2023

Within the Municipality V, the Torpignattara Urbanistic Area (ZU 06A) is today one of the most multi-ethnic areas in the city and in Italy. The Bangladeshi community is particularly numerous and rooted: since the 1990s, families of Bangladeshi origin have chosen to live in the area, setting up businesses there and reuniting their families. As of 2023, as already mentioned, in the ZU, next to Bangladeshi citizens (3,111) the Chinese community is significantly present (1,995), and in addition to these, Romanians (954), Filipinos (820), Indians (302), Egyptians (357), and a variety of other nationalities with a smaller numerical presence live in the district¹⁵.

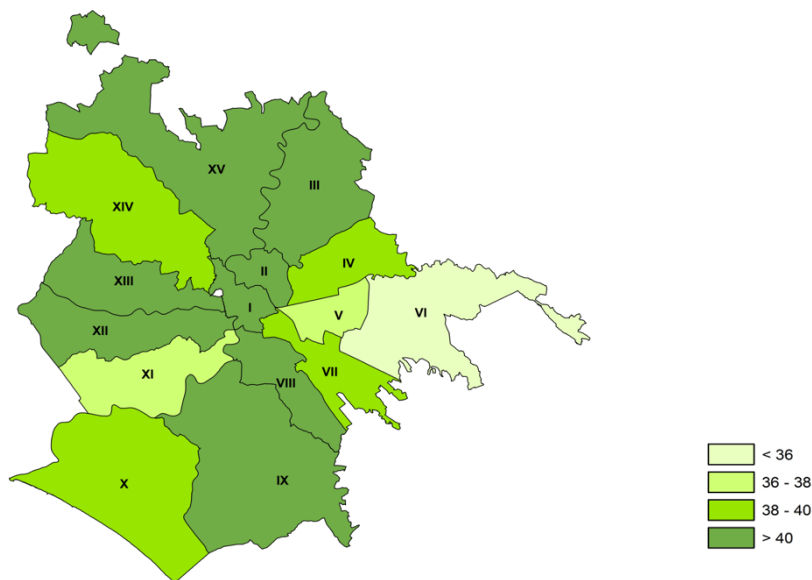


Figure 11 Average age of foreign citizens in Rome by municipality as of 2022. Source: Municipality of Rome 2023

The distribution of foreigners in the area is not uniform, as most are concentrated in the axis of Via Casilina and in the vicinity of Piazza della

¹⁵ A clarification is necessary. The demographic data used in this analysis refer to the urbanistic zone 06a, corresponding to the area administratively labelled as “Torpignattara”. This delimitation, however, is biased with respect to the territorial perception shared by both residents and Romans who spend time in the neighbourhood, since it excludes two sections of the neighbourhood that, although commonly recognised as an integral part of Torpignattara, officially fall within the urbanistic zones 06b (Casilino) and 06c (Quadraro). These zones include the “Pisacane” primary school, the headquarters of important associations – including Asinitas, to be discussed later –, the entire Via di Torpignattara, and Parco Sangalli, a symbolic place for both the neighbourhood and the local Bangladeshi community.

As a result, the estimate of the population of Bangladeshi origin which can be attributed to Torpignattara, if limited to 06a alone, is underestimated: the consideration of the areas 06b and 06c would lead to an increase of approximately one thousand units, given that together they count about 2.400 Bangladeshi residents. This discrepancy must be kept in mind when interpreting the results presented here.

Marranella and Via di Torpignattara, where there are numerous ethnic shops, Islamic and Hindu places of worship, and headquarters of migrant associations. In terms of numerical evolution, while the Italian resident population tends to be elderly and slightly decreasing (due to low birth rates), the population of foreign origin has on average a younger profile (Municipio V has the second youngest mean age of foreigners in the city, with 37.3 years) and has contributed to maintain a lively local demographic turnover: in the neighbourhood's schools, for example, a high proportion of children have a migrant background, reflecting the new face of the population. In fact, Municipality V has the absolute highest share of foreign pupils in both kindergartens (656 foreign pupils in the 2021/2022 school year, 15.2 per cent of the total, against 460 in Municipality VII, 10.7 per cent of the total), the second highest share in primary schools (2,254, against 2,338 in Municipality VI) and in middle schools (1,142 against 1,382 in Municipality VI).

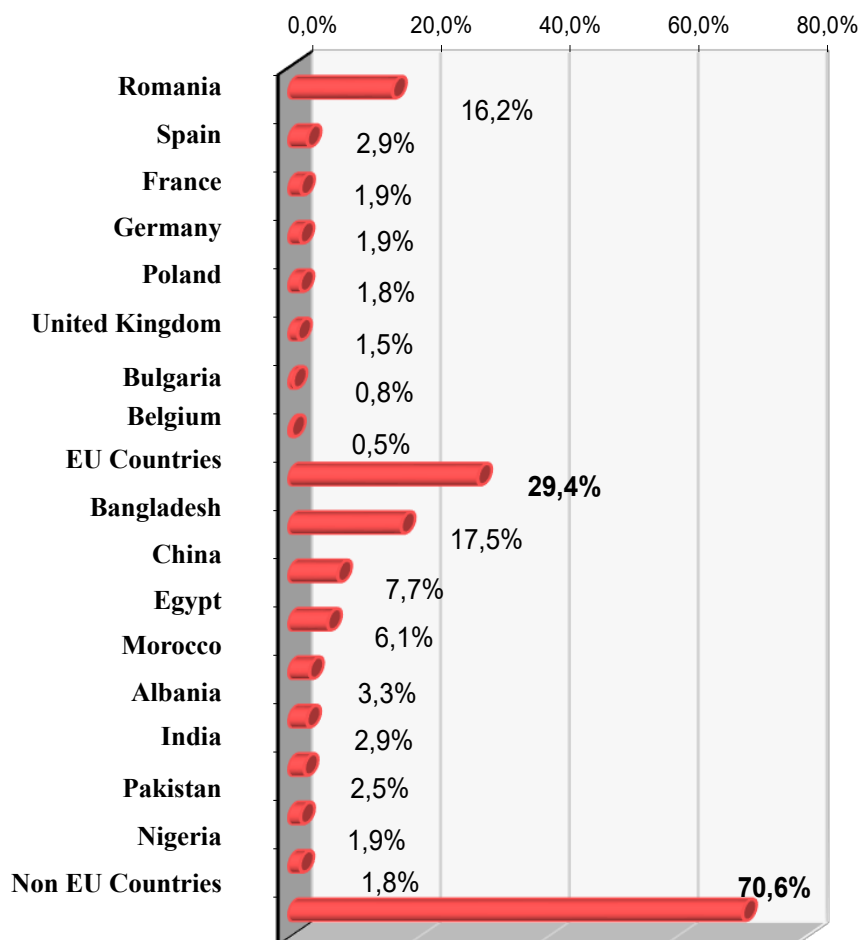


Figure 12 Most representative nationalities with enterprise positions in Rome in 2023. Source: InfoCamere

2.4.2 Torpignattara

After they had left Porta Furba behind them, one step at a time, and made their way deep into a kind of Shanghai of small gardens, lanes and wire fences, clusters of shacks, empty plots, building sites, looming blocks of flats and muddy streams, and when they were almost at the Borgata degli Angeli, between Tor Pignattara and Quadraro ...

(Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Ragazzi di vita*, 1955, personal translation)

In the heart of Rome's eastern first periphery, along the ancient Via Labicana, today Via Casilina, an area called *Ad Duas Lauros*, ‘between two laurel trees’, which most likely recalled two large sacred trees left to mark the edge of a lost forest, or else the decoration of an imperial pavilion adorned with a twin laurel branch, already existed in the imperial age. In the area grew significant monuments of ancient Rome, such as the vast catacombs of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, among the largest in the city, a place of burial of Christian martyrs and pilgrims, and a necropolis reserved for the *Equites Singulares*, the imperial Cavalry force, which received the honour of burial here. Following the Battle of Ponte Milvio, during which the *Equites Singulares* had supported Massenzio, Constantine ordered the dismantling of such military force and to destroy their necropolis. In its place, the emperor commissioned the construction of a mausoleum built between 326 and 330 A.D. initially intended as his own burial place, and then, as his plans were redirected towards Byzantium, refounded as Constantinople, the mausoleum was destined for the burial of Constantine's own mother, and became the Mausoleum of St. Elena, as it is known today (Vendittelli 2012; Radaelli et al. 2019). During the 4th century, the area was integrated into the emperors' rural estates, the “*possessio Augustae Helenae*”, and also became a point of reference for early Christianity thanks to the construction of the basilica of Saints Marcellinus and Peter above the catacombs (Volpe 2003). In the following centuries, the landscape of *Ad Duas Lauros* was slowly transformed, losing its monumental feature and becoming part of the extensive “agro romano”, i.e. the Roman countryside outside the Aurelian Walls. In this exact area, centuries later, the working-class area of Torpignattara took shape, which at the beginning of the 20th century was still a rural suburb just outside Porta Maggiore, dotted with vineyards,

farmhouses and the ruins of the Alessandrino Aqueduct. The area's new toponym derives indeed from the Mausoleum of St Helena: the dome of the mausoleum, in fact, contained amphorae (*pignatte*) used to lighten the structure, hence the area's first scattered inhabitants started calling the building the “tower of pignatte”, as the dome had partially collapsed, leaving the amphorae clearly visible.



Figure 13 Mausoleum of St Elena in Torpignattara, 1930s, still surrounded by countryside. Courtesy of Marco Caselli



Figure 14 Mausoleum of St Elena today. On the right, the oratory of the Parish of Saints Marcellinus and Peter; and on the left the entrance to the catacombs. Personal photo taken in 2024

From the beginning of the 20th century, with the urban growth of post-unification Rome, the district experienced rapid and uncontrolled development on the margins of urban legality, analogous to that of many other Roman suburbs of the time. The need to accommodate craftsmen and white-collar families, often recently immigrated to the city or pushed out of the city centre by its urban transformations, produced a rapid and spontaneous building development that was often illegal but socially functional in order to meet the public housing demand of the city's rapid demographic expansion. Torpignattara became one of the first Italian examples of such urbanisation by self-development (Ficacci 2007; Cellamare 2014), where outside of large public plans, it was small private entrepreneurs, cooperatives and the inhabitants themselves who built affordable housing on the available land. In many cases, commuting workers from the other provinces of the region, who used the small urban railway Rome-Fiuggi every day along the via Casilina, the consular road running through the district to reach the ministries or neighbourhoods of the first suburbs that were developing in those years, carried on a phenomenon similar to the ship jumping of the Bengali lascars (*infra* §) in the United Kingdom. In fact, farmers from neighbouring villages, construction workers, and civil servants began to buy up portions of agricultural land in the area that were not intended for building construction, hence rather affordable, only to start building small houses on it. These were the typical houses of the time, still visible today in the few surviving ones in the neighbourhood, with one or two floors with a courtyard and terrace, designed to allow later additional storeys for relatives who would join them on their migration route (Ficacci 2007, 2012). At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the first industries also sprang up, attracting further flows of working-class families from other Italian regions. Establishments such as the Sirono pharmaceutical company, the Cisa-Viscosa textile factory, Officine Tabanelli, the Pantanella pasta factory and the Peroni beer warehouse sprang up in the area, absorbing labour and fuelling demand for local housing and services (Bruni 2022).

During the Fascist regime, the urbanisation of Torpignattara continued in a disorganised but rapid rhythm. The regime provided the first public facilities: a primary school and a female schoolhouse were built, and even a large neighbourhood cinema, the rationalist-style Cinema Impero, was inaugurated (Ficacci 2012). At the same time, in the absence of further State intervention, it was the Catholic Church that provided assistance, as religious

congregations began to offer catechism and oratory services and aid to the area's many indigents. During this period, Torpignattara developed a keen sense of community and an early political awareness. During the Nazi-Fascist occupation (1943-44), the inhabitants played a decisive role in the Roman Resistance, organising both armed groups and civil networks to support the partisans. Torpignattara made a decisive contribution to the Liberation struggle, involving both armed partisan groups and the civilian population in a collective effort of defence and solidarity. This tradition of civic commitment continued in the post-war period: as early as 1945-46, the idea of the “popular councils” was born in the neighbourhood, neighbourhood representative bodies designed to put forward proposals to the municipal administration on the redevelopment of the suburbs and the creation of public services.

In the years of post-war reconstruction Torpignattara continued to change its face. The pre-war houses and shacks were joined by a further wave of new constructions. While many areas remained informal and self-constructed, along the main arterial roads emerged the first public housing buildings and the first private apartment blocks. In particular, new constructions along Via Casilina and Viale Antonio Filarete consolidated the urban framework, effectively connecting Torpignattara with the neighbouring Pigneto district (Ficacci 2012; Bruni 2022). The result was a fragmented, working-class but also variegated building fabric: alongside the majority of workers and bricklayers, a small white-collar and commercial bourgeoisie also settled in the neighbourhood, a component often ignored by both historical and current narratives (Ficacci 2012). In the 1950s and 1960s, the district thus became a densely populated and lively area. Shops, taverns and neighbourhood markets began to animate the streets, the Cinema Impero filled its theatres with locals, while in the courtyards and lots families intertwined in a close network of village-like solidarity transplanted in the city. In this period, as Pasolini's distinctive narratives began to spread¹⁶,

¹⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini, poet, writer and director, was one of the most complex and influential figures of 20th century Italy. His relationship with the Roman suburbs - and in particular with the districts of Pigneto and Torpignattara - left an indelible mark on both his artistic production and the city's imagination. Here he met one of the most representative actors of his cinematographic production, Sergio Citti, who until then worked as a whitewasher in Torpignattara. He thus began to spend time in the borgata, picking up voices, dialects and stories that would flow into his first novels, *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and *Una vita violenta* (1959), and into movies such as *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), in which Torpignattara and the surrounding areas became central settings. Likewise, Alberto Sordi, a Roman emblematic actor, intertwined his artistic career with this neighbourhood. In fact, Torpignattara appears as a scenario in several of his films, including *Un americano a Roma* (1954), with its famous scene involving the Marranella canal, a small, now silted-up waterway that ran through the neighbourhood at the time (hence the toponyms of Via della Marranella and Via dell'Acqua Bullicante, two of the neighbourhood's main streets), *Ladro lui, ladra*

Torpignattara further solidified the strong identity of a working-class neighbourhood and pride of local belonging.



Figure 15 Self-built shacks near the Alessandrino Aqueduct in the Parco Sangalli, Torpignattara in the 1960s. Courtesy of Roma Sparita website

From the 1970s onwards the neighbourhood entered a period of demographic contraction and economic fatigue. De-industrialisation, coupled with the relocation of several local plants, removed the productive backbone that had sustained the area; the broader recession of that decade further amplified the downturn. Italian couples who, in earlier years, had settled in Torpignattara as a step on the ladder of social advancement, drawn by affordable housing and proximity to the city centre, now found their educational credentials and employment trajectories sufficiently enhanced to contemplate relocation. Accordingly, many opted for districts perceived as more refined and better serviced, accelerating both residential turnover and the area's incipient decline. Demographically the neighbourhood grew steadily older, while its commercial fabric thinned: one shop after another folded and the urban tissue appeared to collapse in itself. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s these trends intensified, ushering in the most pronounced phase of depopulation. Torpignattara drifted to the city's margin, its building

lei (1958), *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* (1977). Both the two artists strongly contributed to the controversial identity that has developed in the neighbourhood as distinctly popular and authentically Roman. On 31 October 2024, a plaque in memory of Pasolini was unveiled in Via di Torpignattara, and the installation of a statue of Alberto Sordi near Via della Marranella is currently under discussion.

stock increasingly dilapidated, its public spaces neglected. A comparatively high incidence of petty and organised crime further depressed property values, discouraging middle-class households from moving in. In local and media perception alike, the neighbourhood was stigmatised as unsafe: drug trafficking, sex work, and sundry illicit trades transformed certain streets into virtual no-man's-lands, not least those controlled by a faction of the *banda della Magliana*, locally known as the *banda della Marranella*. The area's reputation reached its nadir, and many long-standing residents departed, leaving vacant flats, shuttered premises, and entire blocks in disuse. Those Italians who stayed – typically elderly or of modest means – looked on with nostalgia as a once-vibrant working-class district slid into decline. Yet this very emptying out laid the groundwork for the next metamorphosis: disused buildings, low rents, and abandoned shopfronts made Torpignattara a porous terrain, ready to receive new populations in search of affordable space (Ficacci 2007, 2012; Vereni 2014; Broccolini 2014; Bruni 2022).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the neighbourhood began to accommodate migrants from an increasingly diversified range of countries. The earliest arrivals were mainly Chinese entrepreneurs, who opened small shops and restaurants, soon followed by nationals of the Philippines, Egypt, Peru and, slightly later, Romania. Bangladeshis initially established themselves elsewhere, above all in the *rione* Esquilino, a central district adjacent to Termini Station yet situated only a few kilometres away, and on the same Casilina axis, from Tor Pignattara. By the end of the decade Esquilino had become the principal gateway to the capital city: a dense network of affordable housing and immediate proximity to public transport hub attracted large contingents of Asian and African migrants (Priori 2012). It was here that the first Bangladeshi grocery stores were opened and the community's initial, informal support networks were forged. Esquilino's strategic location, however, soon made it a target for both private investment and publicly funded urban "requalification" schemes. Rising property prices, coupled with the absence of large-scale out-migration, curtailed the supply of affordable accommodation. From the mid-1990s the renovation of apartment blocks and of the historic market significantly reduced the room for low-income households (Mudu 2003; Scarpelli 2009; Pompeo 2011). Gradually, therefore, many Bangladeshis moved eastward along the Via Casilina and Via Prenestina in search of larger, less expensive flats. Districts such as Tor Pignattara, the adjoining Pigneto and Marranella areas, and

further out Centocelle, registered a steady increase in Bangladeshi settlement (Priori 2012).

A pivotal moment in this relocation was the occupation of the disused Pastificio Pantanella at the beginning of the decade. The vast pasta factory – closed since 1970 and once a major source of local employment – was taken over in March 1990 by several hundred migrants, mainly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, who converted it into makeshift housing for want of alternatives. Its forcible eviction in early 1991 shocked public opinion and laid bare the multicultural reality then emerging in Rome (Curcio 1991; Priori 2012). In the aftermath many Bangladeshis turned to the nearby working-class quarters. Tor Pignattara, only a short distance from Esquilino, offered comparatively low rents and premises suitable for small family businesses, and rapidly became the principal focus of the community's second phase of settlement.



Figure 16 Sangalli Park nowadays. Photo taken in April 2024, courtesy of Stefano Romano

Tor Pignattara played a key role within Rome's migration landscape through a combination of structural, social and cultural factors. First and foremost, the district offered a sizeable stock of relatively affordable housing. Many medium-sized flats, frequently owned by elderly Italians, were let or sub-let to groups of immigrants. Cohabitation was the norm: groups of male workers shared three-room apartments, while extended families occasionally rented entire stairwells. Such residential arrangements were facilitated by dense kinship and village networks: once a pioneer had

secured accommodation in Torpignattara, he typically summoned relatives and acquaintances, setting in motion a chain-migration dynamic. The area's location proved equally advantageous, close enough to the historic centre to allow daily commutes, yet far enough to guarantee informal gathering places and lighter policing. Over time this combination generated a marked "community effect": the visible presence of Bangladeshis attracted further compatriots, reinforcing circuits of mutual support and embedding the group locally. By the late 1990s streets like Via della Marranella and Via di Tor Pignattara already displayed unmistakable signs of a burgeoning Bengali enclave: shop-fronts with Bengali lettering, grocery stores and tailoring workshops, traditional garments in public view, and lively forms of collective sociability.

The community's trajectory unfolded in successive stages. In the early phase the migrant population consisted largely of first-generation men engaged in precarious employment and strongly oriented towards remitting savings to families back home. As legal status became more secure, family reunification gathered pace: wives and children arrived, bringing new housing requirements and service needs and, consequently, altering Torpignattara's social composition. Bangladeshi pupils began to appear in local schools, women in traditional dress became a familiar sight, and with the arrival of entire families, the community soon required spaces specifically devoted to worship and collective life. In the early 2000s Torpignattara saw the opening of its first Islamic centre in a semi-basement shopfront; it rapidly became a key point of reference for religious observance and social cohesion. Today at least six prayer halls operate in the neighbourhood. Besides accommodating the Friday prayers and the principal festivities of the Islamic calendar, they perform a pronounced educational function: classes in Arabic and Bengali, Qur'an lessons and after-school tuition, addressed above all to second-generation children, are held on a regular basis. In this guise the centres serve not merely as loci of devotion, but as hubs for sociability, scholastic support and cultural transmission. Their activities sustain the community's ties with its country of origin while, at the same time, facilitating pathways of integration and dialogue within the Roman context. In parallel, associational life has grown steadily more complex. A range of migrant organisations now offer guidance in securing employment and housing, assistance with administrative procedures and mediation vis-à-vis local institutions. Although these bodies often mirror political cleavages in the homeland, they nonetheless cooperate in the pursuit

of collective welfare, reinforcing a culture of mutual aid that has become a hallmark of the Bangladeshi presence in Torpignattara.

This process of entrenchment has left a tangible imprint on the neighbourhood's social fabric. The arrival of foreign families breathed new life into spaces threatened by depopulation, revitalising schools, public gardens and recreational facilities. The local primary school, Carlo Pisacane, has emerged as a symbol of the transformation: through the concerted efforts of teachers, parents and civic associations it has become a laboratory of inclusion and intercultural practice. Taken together, the Bangladeshi community, alongside other minority groups, has contributed to a genuine, bottom-up renaissance of Torpignattara. Community leaders underscore, with evident pride, how the diaspora has helped to rehabilitate the area through work, familial commitment and religious practice, turning Torpignattara from a marginal periphery into a dynamic, vibrant neighbourhood that serves as an identity and cultural point of reference for many new Romans. The district is now recognised not only as one of Rome's most multi-ethnic quarters, but also as a site of active integration and social experimentation – needless to say, not universally nor without its controversial aspects, as will be examined in the pages that follow.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines in detail how the research was designed and conducted, emphasizing the iterative process of negotiation between the initial analytical intentions and the evolving contingencies encountered during fieldwork. The conceptual premises that underpinned the research questions, deeply rooted in the ambivalent dynamics of transnational diasporic imaginaries, processes of spatial concentration and modes of public recognition, have directly shaped both the methodological strategy and the operational choices made throughout the research process.

The methodological framework adopted in this research is deeply intertwined with the empirical and theoretical premises already outlined in detail in the second chapter, where the specific configuration of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome was extensively contextualized. The research questions that guided this study emerged precisely from the long-term observation of this context, developed through a prolonged engagement with the Torpignattara neighborhood, which began as early as 2015. During these years, my involvement with local networks, initially through volunteering as an Italian language teacher within one of the Islamic prayer rooms managed by Bangladeshi community members, allowed me to closely observe, over an extended period, the everyday life, transformations, and internal dynamics of this urban space.

It was through this prolonged field exposure that I first encountered what appeared to me as a constitutive paradox of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome: while everyday life was deeply anchored in the material and social fabric of the Italian capital, the imaginaries, aspirations and symbolic affiliations remained persistently projected toward external nodes of the transnational diasporic space, most notably London. It seemed to me then that this tension generated a profoundly ambivalent configuration, whereby settlement practices and community-making could unfold in the concrete immediacy of Rome, yet were continuously refracted through the narratives, social mythologies, and prestige hierarchies that the British-Bangladeshi experience embodies within collective imagination (Appadurai 1996; Della Puppa and King 2018; Della Puppa 2021).

For many among the Bangladeshi diaspora, the unattainability of London has, paradoxically, amplified its symbolic centrality, transforming it into a repertoire of emulative practices, consumption styles, and intra-community status markers. Such transnational imaginary thus acts as

powerful framework of sense-making, informing not only individual aspirations but also collective strategies of visibility, belonging, and adaptation to the urban space of Rome. This dynamic, as elaborated in the preceding analytical chapters, constitutes the core premise from which the research questions and corresponding methodological choices directly derive.

From these considerations emerged the first cluster of research questions: what drives the marked territorial concentration of Bangladeshis in Rome, particularly in the Torpignattara district, and what social, symbolic, and structural effects does this concentration generate? To what extent do diasporic imaginaries and transnational reference models like London reshape the modalities of settlement, urban adaptation, and processes of visibility and recognition? How does this exceptional pattern of spatial organization interact with broader dynamics of integration, social mixing, and governance in a context such as Italy, characterized by a historically weak multicultural tradition and a political ambivalence towards migration?

At the same time, the research sought to address more specific questions related to governance structures and participatory dynamics: what is the role of local Bangladeshi associations in mediating access to institutions and in negotiating public visibility? Who participates in these processes of community representation, and who remains excluded? What institutional and policy frameworks, both formal and informal, condition these trajectories in the Italian context, and how do they compare to the London experience, where public policies of multicultural governance have long structured the incorporation of minorities?

Furthermore, it became crucial to investigate how these processes impact second generations, whose experiences often depart from those of their parents, engaging with issues of belonging, citizenship, and future projections that reflect the ongoing negotiation of their hybrid positionalities.

Accordingly, the methodological framework adopted has been primarily grounded in qualitative and ethnographic research techniques, which are particularly suited to investigate the narrative constructions and argumentative foundations through which individuals and groups explain their own trajectories in what can be described as their narrative accounts of causal processes (Becker 1958). Rather than applying pre-existing categories in a deductive fashion, the methodological strategy evolved through a continuous dialogue between the theoretical frameworks employed and the empirical material progressively collected in the field.

The choice to prioritize participant observation and ethnographic interviews reflects the nature of the phenomena under investigation, where collective imaginaries, transnational repertoires of practice, and processes of multipresence (as elaborated in Chapter 2) intersect to produce forms of belonging that cannot be fully understood through quantitative or standardized instruments. Ethnography, by allowing close attention to the implicit dimensions of social interaction, to the unspoken norms of intra-community life, and to the performative aspects of public and private narratives, has enabled to access layers of meaning that would have otherwise remained opaque thanks to its ability to capture the thick descriptions of social worlds and to access the implicit dimensions of everyday life (Geertz 1973; Appadurai 1996; Blunt and Dowling 2006).

This methodological orientation was also guided by the necessity to adopt a flexible and ethically sensitive approach to the participants involved, taking into account the varying degrees of vulnerability, exposure, and representational asymmetry that different actors may experience. Although the level of vulnerability was not high across all interlocutors, ethical reflection remained a constant concern throughout the research process, shaping decisions about the selection of interviewees, the choice between formal interviews or informal conversations, and the degree of identifiability of the empirical material included in this dissertation. In many cases, the informal settings of participant observation, daily encounters, and extended field immersion allowed for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of experiences, aspirations, and internal community dynamics that might not have emerged within more rigid interview protocols.

In the following sections, I will elaborate in detail on the methodological pathways followed during the fieldwork, beginning with the selection of field sites and participants. I will then address the specific modalities of participant observation, the structure and function of ethnographic interviews, and the supplementary use of secondary sources and documentary materials that have enriched the analysis. Finally, I will reflect on the ethical dilemmas and positionalities that have accompanied the research, as these inevitably shaped not only access to the field but also the interpretative frameworks through which the collected material has been analyzed.

3.1 Choice of field sites

Anthropology has long built on a tradition of researchers immersing themselves in a “primitive society”, typically spending extended periods in one place and with one community. This classical model contrasts with the more mobile and networked approach found in migration studies, where ethnographers often follow participants across multiple locations. As Hannerz (2003) notes, migration research has moreover the feature of historically been conducted in both origin and destination contexts.

The choice of field sites for this research was made early in the development of my research. My initial focus was on the Bangladeshi community in Rome, therefore a context of destination for Bangladeshi migrants, but only one of many, and not the “main” one. As the early stages of my involvement in the field, when I was still considering my project design, it became evident that understanding this community also required considering another key site: London. London did not serve as a comparative counterpart to Rome, but rather as an integral part of the social world I was studying. As already explored in depth, London functions as a guiding horizon for Bangladeshis living in Rome, and elsewhere in Europe. For this reason, it was included in the research design and became a necessary second site for ethnographic investigation. Within both cities, I conducted research in a variety of locations. I followed participants across different neighbourhoods and attended diverse events, tracing their engagements and interactions throughout their urban environments. I accompanied participants to numerous places that were meaningful to them, dispersed across both Rome and London, and to gatherings, meetings, events, demonstrations and private domestic moments they allowed me to participate in.

One of the strengths of multi-sited ethnography – which is characterised by the act of following people, practices, and discourses across different locations to understand the interconnectedness of their experiences – lies in how it can reveal translocal and transnational dimensions in a way that is integral to and integrated in a discontinuous and multi-sited object of study (Marcus 1995). This becomes possible as ethnographers map and trace the complex connections that shape their participants’ lives across spaces. Hannerz (2003) suggests in fact that even the term “multilocal”, and by extension, “multi-sited”, may not fully capture this dynamic, proposing instead the term “translocal” to reflect the entangled nature of fieldwork in migration contexts. I believe this notion applies in a very fitting matter to the

endeavour I propose in this research, with the selection of Rome and London as two sites, interconnected in multiple, profound ways. Places are thus not considerable as isolated, independent from one another, or even perfectly comparable, they create local bundles of relationships (Hannerz, 2003) that are integral to the research and the answer to its research questions. In this light, my approach to fieldwork was not merely comparative but relational. As Hannerz (2003) notes, these linkages make the multi-site study something different from a mere comparative study of localities. My multi-sited (or translocal) ethnography sought to illuminate these interconnections and how they shaped the lives, aspirations, and strategies of Bangladeshi migrants across Rome and London.

3.2 Methods of data collection

Building on these premises, the planning of my fieldwork combined both the long-term empirical exposure accumulated prior to the doctoral research phase and the more systematically structured data collection subsequently conducted within the PhD framework. In fact, as already mentioned, the very formulation of the research questions was itself the product of earlier immersive experiences in the field, particularly in the Torpignattara neighborhood of Rome, where I had already been present and active since 2015. This early involvement provided not only preliminary insights but also the initial empirical intuitions that progressively shaped the direction of inquiry. What was first encountered as an apparent paradox of settlement and transnational projection later evolved into the central analytical thread that guided the entire research trajectory.

From this point of departure, the subsequent research phase took shape as an iterative process of continuous negotiation between pre-existing hypotheses and the shifting empirical realities encountered in the field. Rather than adhering to a rigid and predefined plan, the methodological strategy evolved through ongoing dialogue between theoretical elaboration and field immersion, allowing the research design to remain flexible and responsive to the emergent complexities of the cases under study. This iterative dynamic, whereby early field exposure informed, refined, and redirected both the questions and the methods, became a defining feature of the approach adopted.

The empirical investigation was thus structured around a combination of participant observation, narrative and semi-structured interviews, and

documentary analysis, with fieldwork conducted in both Rome and London as key nodes of the transnational Bangladeshi diaspora. In Rome, attention was concentrated primarily on the neighbourhood of Torpignattara and its surrounding areas, selected for their relatively high concentration of Bangladeshi residents and for their symbolic role as the principal spatial and social hubs of Bangladeshi life in the city.

In London, fieldwork extended across multiple sites within the borough of Tower Hamlets, with a particular focus on – but not limited to – the well-known areas around Brick Lane such as Whitechapel and Spitalfields, but also Mile End and New Ham. Here, the historical sedimentation of Bangladeshi migration, combined with the institutionalization of multicultural governance structures, offered a valuable comparative lens through which to investigate the dynamics of community formation, visibility politics, and civic incorporation within the wider diasporic imaginary.

3.3 Participant observation

Participant observation was a central component of my methodology and shaped the core of my engagement in both Rome and London, though with different durations and intensities. In Rome, where I am based, participant observation unfolded continuously across the entire duration of the research. This allowed for a long-term, permeating engagement with the field, enabling me to follow participants over time, across different settings, and through a range of everyday and community-based activities. In London, I conducted fieldwork over a three-month period during a visiting stay at Roehampton University, under the supervision of John Eade. Despite its shorter timeframe, the research in London was immersive and allowed me to trace the specific translocal connections between the two cities that are explored in this dissertation.

Throughout this process of long-term fieldwork in several field sites, I took part in various activities that enabled me to build relationships and develop mutual understanding with participants. We often shared activities and daily experiences, and this joint involvement was key to building trust and insight. Ethnographic fieldwork provided crucial knowledge not only through direct presence – attained through interviews and participation – but also through attentiveness to absences: the gaps, silences, and barriers that were equally informative in shaping the field.

Participant observation, as both practice and epistemology, provided the framework for these insights. According to Atkinson et al. (2001), its defining elements are precisely observation and participation, and these operate within a variety of disciplinary traditions. O'Reilly (2005) describes ethnography as the act of spending time with people, becoming part of their lives by observing, listening, and asking questions. Similarly, Emerson et al. (2001) define participant observation as creating a base in a specific setting for a relatively long time with an aim to experiencing and analysing the social processes that occur in that setting. In my research, this meant spending as much time as possible engaging in everyday activities alongside participants. Sharing experiences in this way allowed me to understand subtle processes often taken for granted. For Ingold (2011), this creates a “communion of experience”, enabling researchers to overcome verbal barriers to understanding and relying on a form of embodied co-presence. These insights build on Howes’s assertion, as cited by Ingold, that shared experience requires positioning sensations in a broader system of collective representations, specific and belonging to a certain community. Pink (2009) similarly emphasizes the embodied nature of ethnographic knowledge, proposing that ethnographic experiences are “embodied”, felt and experienced by the researcher through their own body and senses. In my case, these practices of embodiment – walking, eating, celebrating, commuting – were crucial to gaining insight into the fabric of the communities I studied. Participant observation also shaped the analytical process itself. Becker (1958) describes the method as one in which analysis occurs throughout the course of research, especially useful when the researcher is interested in the deep understanding of an organization or community. He also notes that sociologists often rely on participant observation precisely when it is neither possible nor desirable to form hypotheses before entering the field. This open-ended, discovery-oriented approach resonated with my own experience in the field and with my anthropological background. Wacquant (2005), in a similar vein, calls for a *carnal* sociology that centers bodily engagement as the primary tool for understanding social life.

Despite its richness, participant observation also presented several challenges. One of the recurring issues was what I would describe as the “zoo effect”: a sense of overexposure or fatigue among community members when repeatedly confronted by the curiosity of researchers. This was particularly salient in Rome, where some participants expressed a kind of

weariness at being studied. In parallel, certain key figures – especially those involved in political and community leadership – demonstrated a hyper-pragmatism. Their interest in collaboration was often directed toward individuals who could bring tangible benefits, such as visibility, political connections, or technical skills. My position as a researcher offered limited access to these forms of capital, both because of the ethical stance I chose to adopt and my decision to not intervene directly in political or organizational dynamics. Indeed, the nature of my research led me to refrain from adopting an action research or activist approach. While this allowed for a more reflective and less instrumental engagement, it also occasionally limited the depth of relationships I could establish with some key actors. My methodological commitment was to remain present, observant, and ethically grounded, even when this meant accepting a certain level of distance or restriction.

Despite these complexities, participant observation remains one of the most enduring and generative methods in both sociology and anthropology. As Berliner (2017) points out, although multiple traditions of the method persist, their practical application has become increasingly convergent across disciplines. In my research, participant observation allowed for an immersive, embodied, and ethically conscious engagement with the field, one that enabled me to navigate both the seen and unseen, the spoken and the unspoken, in the lives of Bangladeshi migrants in Rome and London.

3.4 Interviews

This thesis draws on qualitative interviews conducted with a diverse group of participants. These include Bangladeshi nationals living in Rome and in London, Bangladeshis who migrated from Rome to London, as well as Italian nationals engaged in municipal politics or activities related to the Bangladeshi presence in the Italian capital. These interviews were not intended to provide a statistically representative sample, but rather to offer depth, context, and a multiplicity of perspectives that would help make sense of what I had already observed in the field. As such, they were designed to gain further explanation for what I had experienced during participant observation, to explore the context in greater detail, and to include differing and sometimes contrasting points of view.

The selection of interviewees occurred through a variety of methods, reflecting the exploratory and adaptive nature of the research. I used nonprobability sampling techniques, which, as Sigona and Hughes (2012)

explain, are particularly effective in studies that do not aim to sample an entire population, especially when the population is hidden or hard to reach. My recruitment process included purposive sampling, entailing targeting individuals with particular characteristics relevant to the research questions and snowball sampling, which allowed me to reach participants through referrals from others. As Sigona and Hughes note, purposive sampling helps researchers focus on particular characteristics of a population, while snowball sampling creates an access path based on trust and existing relationships. Some participants were recruited during participant observation activities, others were introduced by key informants or individuals I was already collaborating with, and some were encountered serendipitously – at community events, during informal gatherings, or thanks to friends of friends. In this way, the sample emerged dynamically, shaped by field relationships and embedded in everyday contexts. These varied recruitment methods, while uneven in their effectiveness, collectively enabled the construction of a diverse and sufficiently broad sample in terms of number and variety.

Interviews were conducted in either English or Italian, depending on the preference and language fluency of the participants. They lasted between one and three hours and covered a range of topics related to migration, belonging, political life, aspirations, and daily experiences, always with attention to how these related to the participants' narratives and the broader social processes being investigated. In most cases, I conducted what could be defined as narrative interviews (Atkinson 1998), in which I guided the conversation according to the themes of interest for my research but largely let participants recount their life stories in their own terms. The emphasis was on letting people articulate their own understanding of their trajectories and experiences, rather than directing them toward rigid questions or fixed categories.

In terms of methodology, these interviews align with the ethnographic tradition. As Heyl (2001) explains, ethnographic interviews differ significantly from more structured forms of interviewing. Traditionally, they are conducted in the interviewee's own language, often at the research site, and rely on relationships built over time. The time spent in the field is crucial as ethnographic interviews emerge from ongoing relationships rather than discrete, time-bound encounters. They often occur spontaneously or alongside other activities, and may not be formally recorded. As O'Reilly

(2005) notes then, the distinction between participant observation and interviews might become blurry and less clear.

This was certainly the case in my own fieldwork, where interviews unfolded organically within broader processes of observation and participation. They often happened informally: while sitting at someone's shop counter, walking through neighbourhoods, preparing for or recovering from a community event. In such instances, the interviews were inseparable from the surrounding environment, the body language of those involved, my own affective responses, and the sensory world in which we were immersed. These dimensions were not background noise, they were part of the data.

This sensorial, spatially-aware mode of interviewing is increasingly recognized in the literature on mobile methods and place-based ethnography. Kusenbach (2003), Anderson (2004), and others have emphasized how the surrounding landscape and physical settings are not passive backdrops but active contributors to people's experiences and narratives. In line with this, I often conducted what might be termed "walking interviews", following participants as they led me through places of personal, social, or political significance. Sometimes they brought me to locations where they felt more comfortable speaking or could avoid being overheard, an act that in itself revealed dynamics of visibility, secrecy, and vulnerability. These mobile interviews enabled me to witness how participants interpreted the spaces around them, how they read the urban landscape, and how these interpretations connected to their experiences of belonging, exclusion, and identity. In this way, the landscape and the neighbourhoods under study became part of the narrative: not simply described, but actively shown to me, explained, and inhabited alongside me. This process offered valuable insight into how participants constructed meaning in relation to place and how they navigated the constraints and possibilities of their environments.

Ethnographic interviews, then, were not supplementary to participant observation, they were an extension of it, another way of listening and learning, shaped by the same principles of engagement, presence, and reflexivity. As the research unfolded, the boundary between "interview" and "field interaction" became increasingly blurred, enriching the data and reinforcing the methodological coherence of the project.

3.5 Visual methods

In addition to ethnographic observation and interviews, other types of secondary data have been collected over the course of this research. These

materials include flyers and printed materials from community events, documentation of public campaigns, and both textual and visual content related to cultural and political performances. These documents form an important part of the research corpus, offering insight into the public expressions, strategies, and aesthetics of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome and London. This visual material has a dual methodological function. On one hand, it constitutes part of the empirical data collected through participant observation, as the distribution, content, and contexts of these materials were closely linked to the activities and social dynamics under study. On the other hand, these materials are (partially) used throughout the dissertation in an analytical manner, both to illustrate key arguments and to support the reader's understanding of the ethnographic contexts discussed. As Harper (1993) notes, the inclusion of visual data can serve as a methodological tool, helping to communicate findings more effectively and to capture dimensions of social life that may not be fully conveyed through text alone.

Throughout this thesis, I have mostly included photographs taken during fieldwork – images of places, events, and everyday scenes. These images are not employed simply for descriptive purposes, they are integrated analytically, used to support conceptual interpretations and to highlight particular dynamics emerging from the field. In this way, I follow the approach outlined by Martiniello (2017), who uses photographs as “visual indicators” of social dynamics that are then related and intertwined sociological theories. While visual methods do not constitute the central methodology of this research, photographs played a valuable supporting role in illustrating and reinforcing the theoretical and empirical analyses. Visual methods have a long-standing tradition in the social sciences, particularly within anthropology. The early work of Bateson and Mead (1942) is foundational in demonstrating the ethnographic potential of photography and film. In more recent decades, visual ethnography has gained renewed attention across disciplines. Robben (2008), Becker (1974), Harper (1993, 2012), and Tona et al. (2014) have all contributed to the development of visual approaches in qualitative research. Although these methods have historically been more prevalent in anthropology, they are becoming increasingly integrated into sociological practice, particularly in studies of migration, culture, and urban life.

In sum, while the visual dimension of this project is not primary, it has been consistently present and methodologically significant. The collected images and visual documents serve not only to enrich the empirical base of

the research but also to help communicate the layered and embodied nature of social life in diasporic spaces.

3.6 Methods of analysis

In qualitative research approaches, data analysis is often understood as an iterative and ongoing process, that unfolds continuously throughout the study rather than being confined to a distinct and separate phase. This approach views analysis as inseparable from both data collection and theory building. From the very beginning of the research, writing and thinking about observed relationships (through ethnographic fieldnotes, for instance) generate preliminary explanations and help shape new questions to be asked of the data. As Silverman and Marvasti (2008) note, data analysis becomes inseparable from theorization, because the research process is cyclical, dynamic, and inventive, in which theory, data collection, analysis, and writing are interwoven.

In this project, data analysis has been embedded in every stage of the research process. Most of the analytical work was carried out on the transcripts of the interviews. However, in many cases, I found it necessary to return to the original audio recordings in order to recall subtle details – such as non-verbal expressions or tones – that were inevitably lost in the transcription process. This was particularly important in understanding the affective and emotional nuances of the interview interaction. Beyond the transcripts themselves, I also relied heavily on the memos and fieldnotes written immediately after each interview and during the long days of fieldwork in Rome and London. These notes often captured contextual details of the interaction, such as body language, the atmosphere of the encounter, and my own reflections on the exchange. In this way, fieldnotes functioned both as a form of reflexive analysis and as a form of data in their own right. They contributed to a deeper understanding of the interview setting and interaction, and became part of the analytical corpus. Additional ethnographic notes included brief descriptions of the neighborhood, scenes to which I assisted, events that I participated to. These small contextual accounts worked as an aid to the conduction of what Clifford Geertz (1973) might call “thick descriptions”, intended to help me reconstruct the full setting and meaning of each encounter during later stages of analysis.

The coding process was progressive and shaped the research as it unfolded. Once a theme or pattern emerged in one interview, I sought to

explore it further in subsequent ones, following an inductive logic until I reached what I considered to be a satisfactory degree of saturation. In this sense, the analysis was never detached from the fieldwork or interview process, but constantly fed back into it. I understood coding as the process of attaching analytical labels to lines or sections of text in order to make comparisons between similar and dissimilar pieces of information. The coding and analysis of the interview contents were done manually. The analytical process was guided by the core themes of the study and was informed by the principles of template analysis (King 1998). In this approach, coding templates are used to organize the data, and the analysis reflects a combination of both theory-driven and data-driven expectations (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). This allowed for flexibility: while I drew on theoretical concepts to inform the structure of the analysis, I also remained open to the emergence of new themes from the empirical material.

Thus, data analysis was not only methodological but also epistemological, as it reflected the very way in which knowledge was built in this study: gradually, reflexively, and through a continuous dialogue between theory, fieldwork, and interpretation.

3.7 Translation of the transcripts

An important consideration in the writing of this thesis concerns the challenges posed by translation between Italian and English. As mentioned earlier, some of the interviews were conducted in Italian, and translating these transcripts into English inevitably raised concerns about the loss of certain qualities inherent in the original language. Specifically, there is a risk that the spontaneity, emotional tone, and vividness present in the participants' speech may not be fully conveyed in the translated version. As saying goes, translate is to betray. This expression aptly captures the difficulty of maintaining full fidelity to the original meanings, rhythms, and subtleties of spoken language. While this is by no means intended as an excuse for any shortcomings in the writing, it should be understood as a clarification of the intrinsic limitations that accompany translated transcripts. These limits are particularly salient in a project where voice, narrative, and lived experience play such central roles. The process of translation, then, is acknowledged here not only as a technical task but also as a methodological and epistemological issue, intersecting with questions of interpretation, representation, and linguistic situatedness within ethnographic research.

3.8 Validity, Reflexivity, and Positionality in Ethnographic Research

Anthropologists have long recognized that researchers' personal characteristics – such as gender, age, class, and ethnicity – significantly influence both access to the field and relationships with research participants. Reflexivity, understood as the process of learning from experience through reflection (Roulston 2010), is a vital practice for addressing these dynamics. Reflexivity itself has multiple interpretations and methods for enactment in ethnographic studies. Wasserfall (1997) describes it as a spectrum, ranging from simply understanding one's positionality to actively working to deconstruct one's positioning towards an increasingly egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the participants, in an attempt to fill or bridge eventual class and power gaps (Heyl 2001). This reflective effort requires ongoing attention to how factors like clothing, language, or mannerisms can shape interlocutors' openness and willingness to share.

Throughout fieldwork, being aware of these dynamics was essential for building trust and rapport. Establishing connections and adapting to the social setting beyond academia was key to facilitating meaningful exchanges. While I did experience an acute awareness of my racial positionality as a white researcher – particularly in relation to exclusion linked to skin colour and colonial history – this awareness was one among many dimensions of positionality I had to negotiate. Reflexivity required me to critically examine my privileges and sensitivities across multiple axes, including class, ability, and bodily presence, and to continuously assess how these shaped my interactions and knowledge production.

3.9 Informed consent procedures

Gaining informed consent in ethnographic settings presents both ethical and practical challenges, which I approached with sensitivity throughout my research. Whenever doubts about consent arose, the data were excluded from this thesis to respect participants' autonomy and well-being.

I prepared a consent form in both Italian and English; however, participants rarely signed these forms, as many felt uncomfortable committing to an official document. This was particularly true in contexts where anonymity was crucial or where participants were distrustful of formal bureaucratic procedures. Instead, I used the consent form as a guideline for verbal explanations, ensuring that participants fully understood the research's purpose and their involvement before any data collection. Verbal consent

was always sought and obtained, and I made it clear that I was a researcher, responding openly to any questions or concerns participants raised.

DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) describe participant observation as one of the most ethically complex research methods, highlighting how participants may become accustomed to the researcher's presence and potentially forget the purpose of the study. While the organizations connected to this research were fully informed about its aims and had granted permission, I remained vigilant in reminding participants about the research throughout my fieldwork. Following DeWalt and DeWalt's recommendations, I sometimes took notes openly in front of participants and regularly referenced the project to maintain transparency.

This ongoing attention to ethical consent ensured that participants' autonomy and trust were respected, balancing the fluid and immersive nature of ethnographic research with the responsibility to uphold clear communication and informed participation.

Chapter 4 – The London myth

We have seen how the formation of Bangladeshi communities in London and Rome took place, and how one of the main keys to interpreting the tendency towards concentration and a certain degree of cohesion within the Roman community is the substantial drive towards competition and emulation with their compatriots who settled in London.

As described above, the proposed condition of multipresence, whereby various forms of collective identity – be they national, religious, class or age-based – come into close contact through increasingly complex, realistic and simultaneous channels of communication, we have seen how this condition challenges both the centrality of nation-states in controlling the content of this identitarian narrative, as Anderson (1991) pointed out, and the binary nature of double presence postulated as an evolution of Sayad's double absence (1999). As we will observe through ethnographic accounts, this condition may, at least partially, call into question certain interpretative approaches. In particular those that tend to emphasize the determinism of migrants' settlement context's structural conditions, in terms of exclusion from certain segments of the labour market or socio-political changes (Ram 1993; Bonacich 1993; Rath 2000) in the ways migrants settle and adapt to their context. At the same time, this interpretation can enrich the perspective adopted by Gardner (1997, 2001) and Eade (1991) on Bangladeshi migration, which already contributed to freeing the phenomenon from a passive and deterministic reading, typical of the neo-Marxist approach, according to which migrants are at the mercy of transnational economic forces (see also Priori 2012). Priori's interpretation of this renewed attribution of agency to Bangladeshi migration, as mentioned in the previous chapter, continues to appear too anchored to an idea of economic rationality; it introduces migrants as fully engaged in seeking to derive the greatest possible advantage from any regulatory loophole, in order to pursue a purely economic gain linked to an idea of mere survival. A view that inevitably confines migration from non-Western contexts to a condition of absence of real aspirational choices. In other words, whereas a Western migrant is usually defined as an "expat" – even regardless of whether they are highly skilled – and a cosmopolitan actor seeking not only better job opportunities but also prestige and self-fulfilment, those coming from the rest of the non-Western world are categorized as "migrants" (see, *inter alia*, Kunz 2023; De Carvalho 2023). They are described as in search of fortune, torn between a

lacking sense of planning and agency, and characterized by a rationality that is nothing more than materialistic, envisioning survival and economic growth as their only aspiration. The alternative perspective on Bangladeshi migration here provided may help to demonstrate that – alongside situations of hardship and need, which are not being denied as they certainly constitute a significant aspect of the most recent migration waves from Bangladesh to Europe (Della Puppa 2018; Morad and Gombač 2018) –, for a substantial portion of Bangladeshis living in Rome and London, *how* to achieve a good level of well-being and security is inextricably linked to matters such as honour, prestige, the image one acquires within one's reference group, and the peculiar social imaginary that has developed over time between Bangladesh and the transnational nodes of the diaspora. Some recent studies (inter alia, Della Puppa and King 2018; Della Puppa 2021) partially recognized the importance of these dimensions and of the role played by London in driving the definition of a model to follow and an aspirational field (Appadurai 2004). This, however, has not led to a deeper exploration of this dynamic, nor, most importantly, of the ways in which this imaginary functions at an operational level, of its implications, and the effects it produces on urban contexts and on the adaptation and homemaking strategies of the receiving local context.

The concept of home is not necessarily linked to the classical conception of a physical, private, and limited place. Feeling “at home” is rather a condition that can be measured across different axes: feeling safe, being able to live according to one's values, having access to a physical refuge, and to meaningful social relationships. Feeling at home in a particular place means attributing to it a meaning that extends beyond the idea of a private, enclosed space. It is about creating territories within whose boundaries, not always visible, a community can define a sense of belonging (Mallet 2004). The experience of migration makes it clear that the concept of home is not something fixed or permanent, but is constantly transforming. Those who move to a new country often have to reinvent their sense of home, building spaces, meanings, and relationships from scratch. This process gives rise to different ways of feeling part of a community and forming new bonds (Miller 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2006). When people move – whether within the same territory or across national borders – they are called upon to continually renegotiate their sense of home. Mobility leads social groups to reinvent their narratives and redefine their identity projects (Appadurai 2013). In this context, home is no longer merely a point of departure, but it

also becomes a destination to be reached, an ideal to strive for (Kuntsman 2003).

It is precisely for this reason that looking at the ways migrants create a “home” can be more insightful in understanding how they adapt to an unfamiliar reality than making use of traditional models, based solely on integration or assimilation. This approach allows us to gain a closer understanding of the processes of belonging, the emergence of new communities, and the creation of bonds that make shared life possible (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2015). This idea of home, not based solely on material elements or physical spatial characteristics, therefore takes shape and consolidates within a broader social imaginary, which plays a central role in the cultural construction of the notion of “home” (Castoriadis 1975; Jacobsen and Andersson 2012). The concept of social imaginary concerns the way people see themselves in the collectivity, the way they think and feel about their relationships with others, the expectations they have in their daily interactions, and the underlying values that guide these actions. Essentially, the social imaginary represents the shared repertoire of meanings that allows individuals to feel part of a whole and to recognize as legitimate those practices and rules that give meaning to shared life (Taylor 2004). The social dimension of existence and its imaginary are therefore closely linked and based on at least two fundamental elements: the way we relate to others and the normative expectations that govern collective behaviour. Social existence is not exclusively based on norms and mutual recognition, but it also implies sharing a sense of legitimacy and validation by the group. Social imaginaries thus function as a kind of collective subjectivity, based on implicit understandings that support and enable shared practices. These imaginaries are collective ways of interpreting the social world which, over time, become shared realities, guiding people’s everyday behaviours and practices (Gaonkar 2002).

This is of paramount importance in understanding the concept of multi-presence as applied to Bangladeshi migration and the processes of constructing their imaginary world, contributing to homemaking. Feeling at home or, conversely, feeling homesick, does not depend in a linear way on whether one is settled or on the move (Rapport and Dawson 1998). When one’s present life seems to be lacking something that is considered important or remembered with pleasure, it is possible to feel nostalgia for a physical place, an atmosphere, certain habits, loved ones, or even a specific way of life in a place where one has not (yet) lived (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

4.1 London: the mythology of migration and multipresence

The point of departure for this chapter is London, where the Tower Hamlets community of Bangladeshi nationals represents for many Bangladeshis in Europe a symbolic place, a reference point or a yardstick against which to measure themselves. It is in London that what we might call the “mythology of the diaspora” takes shape and consolidates: a web of collective narratives, memories, episodes, expectations, and unwritten rules that circulate, albeit unevenly and certainly partially, among generations of migrants and non-migrants, marking individual trajectories and conditioning the choices of the collective even decades later and thousands of kilometres away. For those who left Bangladesh and now watch from Rome, London is the desired destination of their migratory journey, a fixed point on the map of the diaspora, and thus becomes a narrative in motion, a living repository of collective memory that is regenerated in storytelling and continues to circulate between the country of origin and those of destination.

The way in which “Bangladeshi London” is described in the interviews, where personal details intersect with collective memories, functions as a form of collective processing, a symbolic construction which, in addition to being based on the aforementioned principles of emulation and competition, can also assume the characteristics of an actual “manual” of survival, especially in contexts that are difficult to adapt to or overtly hostile. And it is in this way that the interpretation is proposed of the tendency toward concentration among Bangladeshis in Rome. Individual trajectories, while different, tend to converge on certain recurring nodes: the language barrier, initial isolation, segregation in marginal living spaces, and the very real need to rely on fellow countrymen as the only available resource. This mythopoetic repertoire of the first migration to the United Kingdom solidifies into a narrative where the experience of the “pioneers” becomes a collective heritage, often evoked even by those who have never lived in London. In this sense, the diasporic imagination is not organized around a real geography, but around an affective topography, marked by the symbolic power which that place continues to exert even from a distance.

But what happens when that same repertoire is handled hundreds of kilometres away, in another segment of the diaspora? This is where what we might call a form of tactical cosmopolitanism (Landau and Freemantle 2010) comes into play, in which the London example is not replicated verbatim, but reworked and adapted to respond to new challenges, in a continuous effort of cultural bricolage (Vereni 2017). London is deconstructed into its

useful elements – community cohesion, readiness to respond to racial attacks, workplace dignity – and then recomposed into new constellations that speak to the here and now.

The 1970s events of London's East End, marked by class and racial clashes, and the street violence we will discuss below, offered Bangladeshis the opportunity – perhaps sometimes the necessity – to forge a combative masculinity, erected as an identity claim which, following the need for a collective response, consequently marked the respectability of an entire community. In Rome, according to Vereni (*ibid*), the neoliberal economic context pushes Bangladeshi migrants to redefine the male ideal in the figure of the breadwinner, willing to endure insults in order not to cause trouble, to keep his job and support his family or send regular remittances to Dhaka. Although there have been forms of resistance, which, as we shall see, have not been expressed through violence, in the face of the sometimes fatal attacks suffered by the Bangladeshi community in Torpignattara, the dominant aspect that the Roman community borrows from the London context remains the most recent one, characterized not so much by conflict as by the prestige of a dynamic, cohesive, and successful community. The London kaleidoscope therefore remains in the background as a pool of possibilities, but it does not impose a single model: instead, it suggests a grammar of flexibility, thanks to which Bengalis can “choose” – within the limits set by racism, market and bureaucracy – which fragment of masculinity to activate in order to be credible.

In grasping how this mythology works, one of the most significant encounters was that with Tareq in London. I was particularly struck by this meeting, which I believe is significant in understanding how what we study or believe we have “discovered” through official texts and sources is actually deeply rooted in the consciousness and memory of Bangladeshi migrants, both in the UK and in Italy. This awareness further clarifies what I mean when I emphasize how historical experiences in the UK have been transmitted through generations in the form of narratives, remaining vivid in the minds of later migrants, albeit variably depending on their personal, family, or community involvement.

As I explained in the methodology chapter, the main reason that pushed me to go to London was not to make a comparison between different contexts, but rather to investigate the narratives and imaginaries related to migration that circulate among the main centres of the Bangladeshi diaspora, namely London, and Rome. Therefore, I was interested in understanding the

mental coordinates and horizons of Bangladeshi migrants when they decided to move to Europe. At the same time, I wanted to explore the most established and influential narratives among those who now live in Rome but continue to look toward London, a “ghost” that is always present in their expectations and aspirations. This aspect, which emerged during years of field research, needed further exploration to fully grasp the meaning and impact of the narratives and imaginaries of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

The other impression I had, and which many interviews such as that with Tareq confirmed, refers to how this condition of multipresence was based on a foundation of prestige, honour, and gossip that modern means of communication have expanded beyond physical borders between countries. In this sense, Tareq provided me with an essential contribution, not so much to reconstruct a presumed “objective reality” of the specific migratory experiences from Bangladesh to the United Kingdom, but rather to identify the “mythology of the diaspora” that had become established and was shared to some extent, which I felt was guiding the interpretation of the migratory phenomenon itself, including its motivations, the strategies adopted, the dynamics of social stratification, and the different opportunities.

I met Tareq during one of the events of *A Season of Bangla Drama*, in November 2023. This festival is an annual month-long event, usually held in November, organized by the Tower Hamlets Council, which brings together artists, activists, and the general public around issues crucial to the British Bangladeshi community. Described on the Queen Mary University website – which has been an organizing partner of the event for about twelve years – as the most important and extensive performing arts festival of the Bengali diaspora in Europe, with more than 200 shows staged in its 22 years of activity, over half of which were written specifically for this event. According to the university’s website, over the years the festival has involved a total of 3,612 artists and attracted an average of around 2,500 spectators each year. The page also emphasizes that the festival has always tackled challenging and often controversial issues, giving space and visibility to marginalized groups.



Figure 17 one of the festival posters on the streets of Tower Hamlets.

I had been in London for two months doing field research when a friend – a Bangladeshi who grew up in Rome in the 1990s from the age of four and then migrated to London about seven years ago – knowing the subject of my research, sent me the festival program. I began attending as many events as possible in an attempt to understand the nature of the festival and its intended audience within London’s large and diverse Bangladeshi presence¹⁷. Among the various events I attended, alongside the theatre performances and concerts that formed the core of the program, one of the most striking was a meeting dedicated to “mental health” and “pathways to

¹⁷ As noted in the reference to the “Bengali diaspora” on the Queen Mary University website, the festival draws on a wider area than just Bangladesh, namely the historical and linguistic region of Bengal, which is now divided between Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. This is an area culturally unified by a longstanding shared tradition – in particular for the Bengali (or Bangla) language – but politically separated following the Partition of 1947 and the subsequent birth of Bangladesh in 1971. In my fieldwork, however, I only met people who claimed a clear identity as Bangladeshi, with no direct references to other parts of Bengal. This leads me to reflect on how, despite the generality of the term ‘Bengali’ used in institutional or academic contexts to include the entire area, in everyday practice and in the migratory dynamics I have observed, identification refers mainly – and quite clearly – to the Bangladeshi nation and its diaspora.

healing” within the British Bangladeshi community. The event seemed to want to directly address a topic often considered sensitive or stigmatized, offering a space for collective reflection on issues related to the diaspora experience of trauma and healing, organized right in the university spaces of Queen Mary.

After a series of talks and readings of autobiographical poems on the subject – of which I was mostly able to follow the contributions of the younger participants as they spoke in English, while those aged over 40 chose to perform in Bengali, making some of the content less accessible to those, like me, who do not yet speak the language well enough – there was time for questions, comments, and reflections from the audience, which allowed for a deeper exploration of some of the themes that emerged.

It was at that moment that Tareq, sitting in the audience, stood up and shared his personal experience after arriving in London in a highly vulnerable condition. Without accommodation and forced to live on the streets for a long period of time, he had begun to show symptoms of acute stress and mental discomfort. On several occasions, he had asked for help from fellow countrymen already settled in the city, receiving indifference in response, if not outright warnings not to “dishonour” his family by speaking openly about those issues. In his account, mental health remains a taboo in the community: those who ask for help risk being stigmatized, and seeking professional support is often perceived as a threat to a family’s respectability.

In his speech, Tareq harshly criticized the audience, accusing them of avoiding to explicitly mention this widespread hypocrisy, the gap between the rhetoric of openness and care, often displayed in public contexts such as this, and the community’s actual attitude of discouraging anyone from openly expressing their discomfort or seeking help in a transparent manner. His words generated palpable embarrassment in the room, breaking the reassuring surface of the meeting and calling into question the implicit consensus around the issue.

Even before attending the event, I already knew that mental health was a particularly sensitive issue within the Bangladeshi community. In Rome, I had already gathered several testimonies about how, especially in schools, teachers often report cognitive or psychological difficulties in Bangladeshi children, often receiving a defensive reaction from families, who tend to refuse to involve professionals and to accept that their children may have such disabilities. Listening to his speech, I couldn’t help but connect all this to the many other references I had collected over the years about honour,

shame, and the value attributed to appearance and prestige, and I immediately thought about how deeply the community's gaze, reputation, and honour can influence daily choices and the way people expose themselves in public. This situation made me realize even more clearly how these aspects constantly permeate the life of the community and helped me to better focus on some insights I already had about multipresence and the importance of collective judgment.

So, as soon as the event ended, I immediately spotted Tareq among the group of people gathered around the buffet and, between one chat and another, I explained my research interest and asked him if he would be willing to be interviewed. We met a few days later, in the same place, in the university hall dedicated to student socializing and relaxation. During our long conversation, Tareq told me how, in his experience, the memory of migration is a story of "critical mass", of unity, of conquering public spaces, of redemption from marginalization, but also of constant vigilance over personal and collective prestige, over the "community gaze", over honour and the way one is perceived, both inside and outside the community. What really struck me as I listened to him was how much he knew about the history of Bangladeshi migration to the UK since the 1960s, even though he had only recently arrived and had told me openly that he had little formal education. This gap between his personal experience and the depth of his knowledge made me reflect on several levels, and I began to see more clearly the parallels between the two contexts and wondered how much these stories, these tales of diaspora, circulate widely, becoming part of a collective repertoire that also reaches new migrants, regardless of how long they have been in the country or their level of education. In this sense, the power of these narratives became even more evident to me, capable of transcending different experiences, generations, and contexts.

4.2 The foundational myth

Tareq started by telling me that most of the migrants who arrived in the UK came from South Asia, at a time when the region was still under British rule. He explained that until 1948, there was only one colonial India, but then the separation led to the creation of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other states. Some people had already moved to the UK before 1948, but the numbers were fairly small. The flow of migrants increased significantly between the 1950s and 1960s. He noted that, in those years, many of those who emigrated to the UK worked for the navy, the army, or other British companies. This

link with colonial institutions, he told me, prompted many to travel to different countries, including the UK.

After World War II, Tareq explains, the United Kingdom faced a serious shortage of male labour. The British government decided to open its doors to workers from former colonies, offering decent wages and the possibility of easily finding employment. However, the intention was not to settle permanently: many planned to stay only for a few years, work, save some money, and then return to their country of origin.

[...] at that time, they were traveling to different countries because they worked for the British Army, the British Air Force, the navy, and all these things. And also, after the Second World War, there was a big crisis of men in the UK. I'm not sure about Italy, but in the UK they had a shortage of workers. They opened the door, said «You can come here, you can work, you have good pay». They thought «Okay, maybe I can earn some money and then return back». So that was one of the reasons for migrating. They never thought they would stay in this country forever. They thought «Okay, I'll come here, work a few years, save some money, and then return back». For some of them, what happened? [they] met some people who arrived then, and obviously it was a different country, and they didn't know the language. Most of them didn't know the language, so it was quite difficult for them.

As already mentioned, and as will become even clearer in the upcoming interviews, I believe it is essential to focus on Tareq's story, not so much to reconstruct exactly what his individual knowledge is, but rather to understand which version of the migration narrative actually circulates among Bangladeshi migrants, especially among those who have not learned these stories from books or official sources, but have gathered them orally, in everyday life or through the stories of other members of the community. It is precisely in these accounts, often transmitted informally, that we can identify the most recurring and significant elements, and which aspects of collective memory are selected, valued, or perhaps distorted in the passage from one generation to the next. Analysing these narratives therefore makes it possible to observe not only the history of migration, but also how it is internalized, interpreted, and shared within the diaspora. The idea of temporariness, of departure as sacrifice, of the hope of return – and then, inevitably, of the discovery that return is almost never possible. In this sense, “mythology” is not just a story about the past, but a kind of manual for dealing with the present and shaping the future, even when the context changes.

His account clearly reveals a sharp divide between those who had already achieved social and economic stability and those who lived in poverty. The migrants who left in those first waves, says Tareq, were not the wealthy: those who had a home, a business, or a role in politics had no reason to abandon everything for an uncertain future abroad. Emigration was seen, in blunt terms, as something “for the poor”:

[...] back then, people who were educated and had well-settled lives doing business, never came. They said «We have everything; why would I go somewhere? I don't need to». They had enough. They had a house, a business; some were in politics and so on. They never came. They said, «Oh, this is for poor people».

In this context, the class issue in the Indian subcontinent seemed insurmountable. Tareq insists on this point: if you are born into a wealthy family, even without an education, you continue to enjoy every privilege. Caste and power count more than merit or education. On the contrary, for those born poor, even education is not enough to really change their condition; doors remain closed, control over opportunities remains in the hands of the wealthy. In this system, power and connections matter more than qualifications or skills. And so, he says, as a poor person, all you can do is acknowledge this inequality and look elsewhere, abroad, for the possibility of a better life.

There is quite a problem in the subcontinent with class. If you are rich, even if your son is not educated, because he is the son of a rich man, he automatically gets all advantages, you know, because he's your son, even though he's not educated. But if you are a poor man, whether educated or not, you can't compete. The rich people handle everything, so there is no access for me or for my future generation. So, as a poor man, I realized that. Also, in the subcontinent, if you have authority, if you have power, you can handle almost everything. Education isn't valued. If you have power, you succeed. So as a poor man, I realized I can't compete with you. Everybody wants a better life, it doesn't matter what colour, race, or religion you have.

Another aspect he emphasizes is the way migrants helped each other. If a poor person wanted to leave, they often lacked the skills or means to deal with the bureaucracy, apply for a passport, and prepare for the journey on their own. They would turn to those who were more educated or had more resources, and, according to his account, those who were in a better position

tended to help for free, without envy or jealousy, with an open and supportive mindset that, in his opinion, was lost in the years that followed.

At that time, if you were doing any work, let's say, teaching or something, and I, as a poor man, had no education, I didn't know how to write or how to get a passport and all these things. So what I did was, you were a rich, educated person. I came to you and said «Sir, I want to go. Can you help me?». You see, they were quite broad-minded, they helped each other. Now, if I came to you and said «Okay, I'll do this for you», and you would pay and blah, blah, blah, but back then it was free. They didn't have any jealousy.

Tareq's account goes on to describe how the first Bengalis who arrived in Great Britain after World War II almost always came alone, without any support networks, and tried to overcome their loneliness by seeking hospitality among their compatriots. In those years, the shortage of male labour – a direct consequence of wartime losses – created a context in which British women, especially Irish women, were willing to marry South Asian men.

[...] what happened was: a man would arrive with no one here, because he'd just left his family behind. He would have nothing. He would look for friendship, look for families to stay with. After the Second World War, there was a crisis of men in this country, so many English women were offered to marry those immigrant men, because they were single. I know so many Bengali people – well, not only Bengali but also Indian – who did that. Most of the local women back then were Irish, so they married Irish women. Some married English women, too.

Studies on Muslims in Great Britain confirm that such unions often began as a strategy for quick integration but remained fragile due to differences in cultural capital, family expectations, asymmetry of resources, and moral control exercised by the communities of origin (Ansari 2004; Maguire 2019).

But because of cultural differences, the language barrier, and so on, those who were educated sometimes managed, but most of the immigrants were not educated. A group of them got married and lived with their English or Irish spouses for a few years. In that time, they had children. But again, because of cultural differences and everything else, it didn't work out, and many of those marriages ended in separation or divorce.

Thus, Tareq's experience highlights a crucial point that has already surfaced: the first generation, lacking social and linguistic capital, saw inter-cultural marriage as a means of immediate survival, but the lack of full recognition by both communities and the weight of the "honour code" made these bonds structurally precarious and transformed the memory of marital failure into a warning for subsequent waves of migrants.

Tareq continues by describing the material conditions of the early years: a handful of men crammed into the same apartment, without central heating, forced to buy oil to fuel a single lamp that served as both a source of light and heat.

So they told me that this is how they used to live, sharing one flat. They had a lamp and bought oil to keep the flat warm, because back then there was no central heating. It was really cold, and that oil heating was all they could afford. [...] Some lost communication back home, they didn't know how to write letters or how to send money. Some didn't even know that they could write a letter to their families.

The scene echoes ethnographic descriptions of early Bengali housing in the East End – humid, crowded rooms, often operated as sublets (Dench et al. 2006; Eade and Garbin 2006). The vulnerability was not only residential but also spatial: many, he says, could not read signs or remember the names of the streets in the neighbourhood; after exhausting work shifts, they ended up getting lost in the winter night. To find their way around, they devised little tricks – leaving bottles or other objects next to a tree to mark the direction of their home – strategies of place practices reminiscent of the tactics of everyday life analysed by de Certeau (1980) in urban contexts where cartographic literacy is absent.

The funny thing [one man] told me was that, because they were uneducated, they couldn't remember the street name where they lived. After work, they sometimes got lost. He said he once wandered outside all night in the freezing winter because he forgot which street it was. They had to learn from their mistakes. So they marked the way when they left the building, maybe by placing bottles or something near a tree, to remember which direction to take. They would say «Okay, my street is to the right. I put something here by that tree, and try to follow that marker». But when heavy snow came, everything turned white, and those marks were gone.

These anecdotes confirm how, in Tareq's imagination, poor education and lack of linguistic capital transformed the city into a labyrinth, forcing migrants to produce forms of situated knowledge, a "know-how" that became essential for negotiating the hostile environment and building, step by step, a geography of survival.

Tareq believes that almost all of his fellow countrymen left with a specific objective: to stay in Great Britain for a few years, save enough money to build a house in Bangladesh, and then return. After three or four years of low-paid work – "less than fifty pounds a week at the time", he tells me – many had indeed sent home the sum they had originally planned, but their families, faced with daily expenses and other unexpected costs, had already spent it all. At that point, disappointment set in, along with a new economic rationality: increase their savings rate, keep half and send the other half home. Thus, the plan to return is continually postponed, until "there" becomes increasingly distant and "here" increasingly comfortable.

Tareq then recalls that, during those same years, Bengalis were exposed to episodes of daily racism that turned the streets into a potentially hostile environment.

At that time there were many racist attacks. When we came to this country, it was quite difficult because everything was different: the language, the work, they didn't have any skills, no educational skills, no job skills, so it was really tough for them. And when they arrived, the main thing they faced was racism. Well, the white people, they suddenly saw a bunch of brown or black people appeared, and the locals asked «Who are they? Why are they in our country?». Many people were badly beaten by white English people, wherever they were. They would say «If I'm here working by myself, some racist whites would come and beat us badly». Even if they didn't know about the police at first, when they did and went to them, the police didn't listen.

In his accounts of physical attacks by groups of white, often young workers or skinheads, Tareq highlights two recurring elements: the isolation of the victims, who worked alone or moved around without company, and the institutional ineffectiveness. This lack of interest reinforced the perception of not belonging and forced the community to develop self-defence strategies, from night patrols to the use of phone booths to call for help in case of danger.

Then people realized «We must stand together, stand against racists». They came onto the streets, Bangladeshis and all Asian communities united. They

held a big march in the area against racism. The police beat them too, but at the end of the day, they established their rights against racism.

Tareq's final words echo those collected a few days later during my interview with Ruksana Begum, artistic director of *A Season of Bangla Drama* festival and Arts Development Officer for Tower Hamlets Council. Ruksana describes the East End of the 1960s and 1970s as a place marked by segregation, racist attacks, and community isolation, until the turning point marked by the murder of Altab Ali in 1978. In both narratives, individual experiences are elevated to founding myths: the violence suffered becomes the catalyst for a collective politicization that pushes the diaspora to make itself visible, to claim a public voice, and to seek dialogue with institutions. This transition – from private experience to shared narrative – paves the way for the testimonies that follow, where other voices will highlight how the memory of those years continues to inform strategies of presence and forms of participation in today's contexts.

4.3 The “Turning Point”. Racism and attacks: cohesion and protection

The interview with Ruksana Begum brings to the fore the notion of turning point that recurs in the testimonies collected and in the literature dedicated to the Bengali diaspora in the East End. In her reconstruction, the transition from an almost invisible presence to a politically assertive community takes shape around an episode perceived as a rupture: the murder of Altab Ali in 1978. Following Wagner-Pacifci (2017), we are faced with an “event” that only acquires meaning through the narratives that, *ex post*, define it as a fracture capable of changing the ordinary fabric of collective life, one of those “turning points” that Bonica and Cardano (2008) identify as qualifying junctures in individual and collective trajectories: a before and after that redefines identities, networks, and aspirations. It is precisely the reaction to this moment of disorientation – what Meo (2000) describes as an experience that suspends routines and certainties – that pushes the Bengali community to renegotiate its position in London's public space, transforming vulnerability into a claim for institutional visibility.

Ruksana recalls that, during her childhood, Tower Hamlets was still the East End left in ruins after the bombardments: broken roads, Victorian houses without modern amenities, urban planning unchanged since 1945.

[...] this area, Tower Hamlets, is a working-class area, East London. It was very run down; it's not how it is now, when I grew up. It was actually really bad, it basically wasn't touched after World War II. So we had all the rundown houses, and even in the 60s, when they did development, they were mostly – because this area was quite racist – they mostly gave new housing to white families. So the Asian and the black families were given all the horrible houses, the houses that were run down, that nobody wanted to live in. We just needed a place to stay, to be fair. And just because everybody lived the same, we just thought that was normal. We didn't think we were poor, we just thought «this is normal», you know, why would you think any different?

The regeneration programs introduced in the early 1960s (Young and Willmott, 1962) openly favoured white families; Asians and blacks were assigned the worst accommodations, those that the British no longer wanted. Ruksana points out a crucial point: since everyone lived in the same squalor, that squalor ended up seeming like the norm. This is the effect that Bourdieu would call *habitus*: the material condition becomes internalized to the point of appearing natural, erasing the perception of deprivation. Only with time, and through external comparison, would the community recognize this discriminatory allocation as part of a broader geography of urban racism denounced by the first reports of the Runnymede Trust on the London public housing market (1975).

Her testimony conveys the brutality of the daily hostilities that marked the East End in the 1970s: houses targeted by Molotov cocktails, excrement and animal corpses stuffed into letterboxes, racial insults that escalated without mediation from verbal threats to attempted physical assault. Growing up in Tower Hamlets, she explains, meant internalizing violence motivated solely by the colour of one's skin.

Our houses in Tower Hamlets were getting bombed, you know, people literally with petrol bombs, poo, shit being put down your door, you know, maggots through your door, through your letterbox. We grew up with these sorts of... «I don't like you because you're brown, that's it, and I'm gonna... I want to kill you». Then you're, like, looking at them, «I don't like you either».

Such episodes coincide with Keith's (1993) studies on the territorialization of racism in East London, as well as Hewitt's (1996) accounts of interracial conflict in Greenwich, London. The image of Asian families barricading their doors against night raids recalls Wacquant's (2007) “territorial stigmatization”, a space that is not only degraded but also

degrading, where repeated violence fixes the identity of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. In this climate, Ruksana recounts the emergence of a sharply contrasting “us” and “them”, foreshadowing the politicization that will be discussed in subsequent interviews: the need to organise themselves not only to survive, but to demand protection and rights in a territory perceived as hostile.

In Ruksana’s memory, 1978 coincided with an escalation of attacks and murders of Asians in the East End that spread terror throughout the neighbourhood: families barricaded themselves in their homes, mothers accompanied their children to school in tight groups and brought them back in the same way, hoping to reduce their vulnerability to attacks. The violence, she says, was fuelled by propaganda from the National Front, a party ideologically positioned on the far right of the British political spectrum, founded in 1967 by A. K. Chesterton, a former member of the British Union of Fascists, through the merger of his League of Empire Loyalists and the British National Party. From the outset, the party promoted an ethnic nationalist vision, arguing that only white people should be considered citizens of the United Kingdom. Research such as that of Keith (1993) accurately describes this climate, documenting deadly attacks and the strategy of patrolling the streets to “defend” a white identity in crisis, as mentioned for example by Paul Gilroy (1987), who analyses the link between British nationalism in crisis and the rhetoric of the National Front.

[...] at that time, there was a series of people being killed in a very short time, and that really got people quite... there was a lot of fear and people didn't want to go out of their homes. People like my mum... I was very little, so I don't remember. I just remember being there, the feeling... I was four then, in 1978, and I just remember something being wrong, I could tell something was wrong. I just didn't know what was wrong. So when we would go to school, all the women would go as a group, drop us off to school, and then pick us up as a group. So it was... everyone stayed together, so that we weren't going to be picked on. All these kind of things. And it was the National Front, so it was fascism. We were talking about fascists, about people that were, you know, who thought Hitler was brilliant, you know, also because they thought we were coming to take over their country.

However, Ruksana recalls how her father rejected the rhetoric of usurpation, remembering how, in the 1950s, it was the British government itself that encouraged men from the subcontinent to emigrate to fill the labour shortage.

[...] as my dad said: «But you [the British] went to Bangladesh or India, Pakistan at that time and said, “Come and help us, we have no workers”. That's why we're here. Not because of anything else. You came and gave us passports and said “Come to the UK, we have no men. Come and make our Great Britain great”».

Her argument directly echoes Tareq's account, according to which migrants were initially perceived as a necessary labour force, but were then stigmatized as soon as the economic context changed. Faced with the fascist threat, the Bengali community deployed neighbourhood solidarity tactics – guarding routes between home and school, sharing schedules and transportation – anticipating the forms of collective self-defence that studies on Tower Hamlets indicate as decisive in the emergence of grassroots political activism. It was in this context of fear and grassroots organization that the reaction matured to the murder of Altab Ali, a turning point to which Ruksana would return many times, preceded in 1971 by another turning point in the Bengali collective consciousness, the war of liberation.

Several things happened in terms of changes. So, the 1971 war in Bangladesh gave a really big sense of identity, in terms of resistance, in terms of fighting. In Bangladesh in 1971, when the war was on, the country was – the guerrilla fighters divided the country into 11 sectors. And the UK was seen as this 12th sector, because we were giving in the money, we were funding the arms, we were giving humanitarian aid, we were also pushing up the political agenda in terms of going to the politicians.

Long-distance participation in the conflict strengthened a sense of belonging based on organized resistance and humanitarian commitment, giving the diaspora symbolic capital that went far beyond financial remittances. The community saw itself as a living part of the state project, not just a periphery of the empire. It was precisely this experience, explains Ruksana, that later made plausible the transition from neighbourhood defense to municipal political action. Tareq reports a testimony along the same lines:

most of the Bengalis, they are united. Everyone struggled. They realized that if they wanted to survive, they needed to help their brothers. «If I want to survive, then I have to support him». And also, they were thinking that they had to be united. Otherwise, you know, all these racist people would beat

them. «We have to live in this country, we have to do something». That was their idea and thought, which was quite positive.

In this vein, Tareq recounts the story of a Gujarati migrant who, in the 1970s, lived alone in Bradford and was attacked by a group of white men who left him with a broken arm. When he went to the police, his complaint was ignored, a common outcome in reports of racial violence at the time.

I know one man who still lives here. He was actually from India, not Bangladesh, but he faced the same things. He said that in Bradford during the 1970s, he was by himself and got badly beaten, his arm was broken by white men. Then he realized he needed to do something. He came to London, he was originally from Gujarat. He told me «From that time on, we must stay together with our people», he said «When we went to the police, they wouldn't listen, so I decided that if they fight, we will fight back». It was a big clash. Migrant people said «If we want to stay here, we must be united and strong. I cannot be strong alone, I need my community»

The experience of violence, combined with the absence of institutional protection, gradually transformed into a process of intra-diasporic solidarity, capable of generating mutual aid networks, self-defence repertoires, and new forms of civic protagonism in the British urban fabric. The movements that arose from these experiences, such as the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford, can be read as emblematic cases of collective efficacy, the ability of a neighbourhood to convert cohesion into protective action (Sampson 2012), developed in parallel with a coalition identity of political blackness in which South Asians of different origins recognized themselves in a common racist enemy (Modood 1994). In this sense, we see how the rhetoric of cohesion, of unity as strength, of a diasporic national group that begins to recognize itself as united in identity despite its differences, also begins to take shape.

Going back to Ruksana, and the real turning point that marked the fate of Bangladeshis in the East End, she talks about how the murder of Altab Ali on May 4, 1978, signalled the end of the “keep your head down” strategy. In just ten days, the community, led mainly by young people who had grown up in the British school system, organized a march of thousands of people from Brick Lane to Hyde Park and presented a petition to Downing Street, a rapid transition from silent victims to political actors.

So in 1978, when Altab Ali was killed on the 4th of May and on the 14th, they did a march and they went to Hyde Park and they handed in a petition to

Downing Street. Within ten days, they politicized. That was a really pivotal moment for the community. It politicized people.

That moment exemplifies the combination of intense threat and sudden opportunity, where lethal violence creates shock, and the presence of youth networks (Tilly and Tarrow 2001, 2015), religious associations, and local unions provides the resources to transform outrage into organized protest. What happened to Altab Ali, who was not a militant but simply a worker, became a “cultural trauma”, an event that, when collectively reinterpreted, cemented an identity narrative and legitimized new claims (Alexander et al. 2004; Alexander 2013).



Figure 18 two of the leaflets used during the protests shown to me by Ruksana

Ruksana's story begins to focus increasingly on the theme that have already emerged of collective cohesion, understood as a political form of resistance and protest. The narrative insists on the role of the masses as a force capable of reaching a critical threshold, capable of shaking consciences and forcing the majority society to open, albeit slowly, the doors of political representation. In Ruksana's interpretation of the events of that period, there are constant parallels with the docility that Vereni

described in relation to Bangladeshis in Rome: a docility that proves necessary in the early stages of migration, when recent arrival, incomplete awareness of one's own resources and possibilities, and the lack of full rights to speak in society make it difficult to claim a place at the tables where decisions affecting everyone, including themselves, are made.

Altab Ali, the person that was killed, he wasn't a political person, he was just a worker. He just wanted to work and go home. But he became a symbol of our movement. Up till then, most people said «Put your head down, don't fight them, let them beat us up, don't worry about it, don't say anything, be quiet». And then 1978 was pivotal, particularly for the young boys, because they were now growing up within the UK system. If you think about people who had arrived from the post-war period onwards, these younger generations were beginning to say «No, if someone hits me, I'm going to fight back. We're going to win, we're gonna fight this one. You know what? We can't take this anymore. We're not gonna». And that really politicized people, because the kids doing it, they got support from the local churches, the trade councils, the trade unions. They did the marches on Brick Lane. Families came out, children came out. The police weren't very helpful. The police, in fact, supported these guys rather than supporting us. They would come and defend them so that we don't beat up them, because there was more of us than them. There's always more of us than them.

Ruksana links Altab Ali's murder to a real institutional leap: the realization that the only way to curtail violence was to become part of the system and change it from within. Within a few years, this insight translated into a visible Bengali presence on public housing boards, neighbourhood committees, and municipal assemblies. Between the 1980s and the early 1990s, South Asian candidates in Tower Hamlets and Newham saw a surge in popularity, a sign that the street activism that began in 1978 had converted into formal political capital (Anwar 1994; Saggar 1998). The path from grassroots associations to council chambers embodies the process of civic incorporation in which a marginalized group, sensing that it can influence the rules, moves from mere defence to demanding a seat at the decision-making table (Modood and Werbner 1991; Geddes 1998). Driven by the emotional echo of trauma, the community mobilized energy across ethnic boundaries, allying itself with trade unions, churches, and social housing movements; that relational capital became a stable bridge between a stigmatized diasporic minority and the arenas of local power (Werbner 2002; Liebelt 2024).

[...] So because of that, because him being killed, I think all these things have happened. We've got MPs, we've got councillors, we've got myself coming into the Council. Well, you know, we've all kind of said «We have to be part of this if you want this change». This is the reason why we are in politics, this is the reason why we're so involved in everything. Because what the community did, once he got killed, they thought «You know what? We need to be in this system to change it». So then they started becoming part of tenants associations, they became part of anything you could be a member, they went and joined everything, saying «No, now we want our voices on this table».

Here, the narrative becomes circular: the story of the “founding events” of the British community – the marches, the racist violence, the collective response, the political rise – returns as a model and term of comparison for those experiencing migration in other European contexts, such as Rome. The voice of the Council leader becomes a prophecy for the Italian Bangladeshi community, which, according to her, will sooner or later also have to go through a phase of strong politicization, of speaking out publicly, of conquering institutional spaces

[...] this was kind of a very collective thing, of everyone kind of feeling the fear, but also the fight back. So again, you know, we had allies. We had, like, the trade unions, like with Dan Jones and his family, the clergyman, the reverend, so all these people who kind of thought this is wrong. So all these groups also came and helped. So again, you can see the collective... like, people here that were in this march came from Southall, from different parts of London to come and support. Someone not liking you for your skin colour... that's not good. the Bangladeshi community in Italy, either they're going to have something like this happen that energizes them, or they'll do it naturally. Some kind of association leader, group leader, some kind of figures will say «Okay, shouldn't we do this?»

The memory of that march, of the crowd passing through London, joined by delegations from Southall and supported by trade unions, reverends, and white activists, shows how shared fear can transform into inter-community solidarity, capable of producing moral alliances and organizational resources beyond ethnic and national boundaries (Della Porta 1995; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). It is precisely this convergence, triggered by racial injustice, that reveals that Bengali politicization was not an isolated movement but the result of a network of actors who recognized what was at stake for the entire urban fabric (Tarrow 1998). Ruksana suggests that similar dynamics could

be activated elsewhere: the Bangladeshi community in Italy, which until now has been more fragmented, could find its cohesion either through a catalyst event or through the initiative of community leaders ready to ask themselves: “Shouldn’t we do the same?” . It is with this question that our gaze turns to Rome, where the presence of second generations, the logic of multipresence, and the competition for local prestige, are redefining belonging and mechanisms of recognition, inviting us to compare two cities and two diasporas that, in very different times but with an open narrative channel, are grappling with the same questions of visibility, security, and citizenship.

4.4 London’s perspectives on the future of the Bangladeshi collectivity in Rome

We now turn to the perspectives of the London interviewees regarding the situation and future trajectories of the Bangladeshi community in Rome. They shed light on the many expectations, tensions, and critical views that inform the comparison between the British and Italian Bangladeshi diasporas. For those who arrived in Italy from Bangladesh, according to the interviewees, the success of the London community can represent the yardstick for what could (or would) be achieved through migration: from the importance of public celebrations and festivals that mark the diaspora’s calendar, to high-profile political representation that allows Bangladeshis to sit on municipal councils, in parliament, and even in the House of Lords. In this context, the opportunity for children to study in English is considered a fundamental resource for social mobility and integration, while the internal cohesion of the community – strengthened by a dense network of associations, Saturday schools, places of worship, and cultural centres – allows parents to pass on the Bengali language, preserve religious practices and codes, and maintain strong control over the daily habits of the younger generations. Other central themes will also emerge, such as competition, the pursuit of prestige, the power of the media imagery, and the sometimes cumbersome weight of the “London model” in the eyes of those experiencing migration in Rome.

In this framework is positioned the voice of Ansar Ahmed Ullah, whom I met thanks to John Eade – my supervisor during my visiting period at Roehampton University – and whom I then got to know personally as a guide in Brick Lane’s Banglatown during one of the events of the *A Season of Bangla Drama* festival. Active since the 1980s as a social worker, youth

educator, and anti-racism campaigner, Ansar now runs the *Swadhinata Trust*, which works to promote Bengali secular heritage and build bridges between the Sylheti community, institutions, and local media. His commitment to the community is complemented by solid independent research, which has led him to document the profound changes experienced by the diaspora in the United Kingdom.

Reflecting on the specificity of the Bengali collectivity compared to other South Asian groups, Ansar emphasizes how Bengali identity is historically associated with a marked propensity for political activism and a strong valorisation of intellectual engagement. According to Ansar, this tendency is rooted in the collective history of Bengal, a region marked by language struggles, anti-colonial battles, and emancipation movements that have helped mold a widespread political consciousness. It is no coincidence, he notes, that there is a widespread belief throughout India that Bengalis are “too political” and prone to debate, often ready to express strong and well-argued opinions on any public issue. This trait, Ansar argues, represents a clear difference from other migrant communities such as non-Bengali Indians or Pakistanis, among whom there is less political participation and less visible involvement in collective issues. The passion for debate and the sensitivity to the dynamics of power and representation seem, in his words, almost inscribed in the DNA of the Bengali diaspora, which tends to remain extremely vigilant, engaged, and active even in the most complex and challenging contexts of migration.

When you come across Bengalis, you should never discuss politics or religion because you'll get into a fight. They're very passionate about politics. And similarly, they're probably very passionate about their cultural heritage and background. And maybe that's why you'll find within the community that there are extreme groups of people who are either too religious, too political or too cultural. I think it has to do with our history and our struggle, that has made us very politically aware of what's going on and what to do and how to tackle the difficult situations. Because it's true, I mean, if you compare our community with the Indians or Pakistanis, they are not that political. But you come across a Bengali and they're all very active and have something to say. They all have a very strong opinion. Yeah, I think maybe it's in our DNA.

Also Ansar, when talking about the Bangladeshi community in Rome, returns to the climate of insecurity and hostility that marked the daily life of Bengalis in London's East End in past decades. The migrant experience, especially in the early years, as we have already heard from Tareq and

Ruksana, was marked by episodes of abuse and pervasive violence: racist insults, spitting, stone and brick throwing, verbal and physical intimidation that made every movement in public spaces a source of constant anxiety. Ansar emphasizes how, in the face of this latent threat, trust towards the outside world was practically non-existent; the perception was that anyone among the local white residents could potentially be hostile or openly racist, and the line between real danger and mistrust became blurred and a part of everyday life. Organized violence was compounded by the pervasive attitude of mockery and disdain that Bengalis experienced from the local population. Linguistic differences became an opportunity for ridicule because of their strong accent, while cultural practices such as Bengali cuisine were systematically stigmatized – the mere smell of curry, Ansar explains, was enough to trigger complaints, intolerance, and further forms of exclusion. What emerges is a picture of profound existential precariousness, in which the construction of internal solidarity networks and the strengthening of communal identity can serve as essential survival strategies in a context perceived as explicitly hostile and, often, openly rejecting.

Ansar reconstructs the long and arduous journey that led the Bengali community to gain a strong position in London's local politics. After years of marginalization and struggles, a significant turning point came in the early 1980s: the Labour Party finally nominated a Bengali candidate, who was elected to the local council. From that moment on, Ansar recounts, Bengalis began to participate more and more in the political life of the borough: since the early 1990s, the number of party members started growing, and with this increase in numbers, their negotiating and decision-making power within the local Wards strengthened. The Bengali diaspora now enjoys a position of prominence and recognition that is unprecedented, at least at the municipal level, if not yet fully on a national scale, and this political achievement becomes, in his words, a tangible sign of how internal solidarity and active participation can translate into social capital.

[...] it was a very long struggle, and it wasn't until 1982, I think, when the Labour Party finally nominated a Bangladeshi candidate for a local election and he won. And then this went on over the years throughout the 80s, 90s, you know, Bangladeshis started to join the Labour Party more in numbers and there were more Bangladeshi members, they gradually had more say in the local ward parties. And at one point, I think the majority of the councillors were Bangladeshi. And currently, as you might know, the mayor of the Council is Bangladeshi, and also the two local members of parliament are.

We also have one member of the House of Lords. She's also from here. So, because of the numbers, they are now dominating the political scenario locally, I think the Bangladeshis' long struggle and finally their numbers helped them or facilitate them to access political power. I would say at the moment the Bengalis are in a very good position in terms of political power locally, anyway, if not nationally.

As already emphasized by Tareq and Ruksana, Ansar also believes that the link between numerical density, security, and cohesion is anything but coincidental, and that the growth of the Bengali community in London's East End has been a real turning point, not only in terms of political representation but above all in ensuring security and daily dignity. The concentration, spatial compactness, and dense network of shops, mosques, and meeting places can be seen as both a resource and a necessity for protection against isolation, discrimination, and the risks that a dispersed presence would entail.

Nobody knew who was racist and who wasn't. As far as you were concerned, every white person could be a racist. The local white population was very unwelcoming to the Bangladeshis, they would make fun of them. They would laugh at the way they spoke because of the accent. They would hate the smell of curry. But by the 80s, because the numbers grew, Bangladeshis started to... you know, there were more of us. So the far right would think twice before coming here because they thought «Maybe we might not be able to get away this time because there's too many of them and they might fight back». And I think because of the numbers, slowly those attacks stopped. When there were a few of us here, they would just target one person, you know, there would be 20, 30 of them jumping on one person. But then, to say, if somebody came and jumped on someone in Brick Lane, a guy would come out of a restaurant and shout, all the other restaurant staff would come out and help. So I think the number made the difference.

In the same spirit, Ruksana also addressed the issue of concentration and cohesion within the Bangladeshi community through the theme of political representation, highlighting the distance between London and Rome. Ruksana too recalls the “electrifying moment” when fear was transformed into a drive for change, with the election of the first Bengali councillor in the 1980s and the gradual conquest of the Council, with the long battle for public visibility and access to institutions.

There was a kind of, like, electrifying moment where people were scared, but also change when we thought «We can't take this anymore» and then we had our first councillor in, I think, 1980s, and then now all of them, I think, in the

council room we've got 45 councillors, of which I think probably 30 are Bengali and Sylheti, and the rest are black British. So again, it's mostly Bengalis, because we realize the importance of being part of that conversation. We need to be at the table.

The comparison with the United Kingdom, where the history of the Bengali diaspora has been marked by moments of crisis but also by a long battle for public visibility and access to institutions, becomes explicit here. This process, he emphasizes, has been crucial in helping Bengalis feel part of the city and giving meaning and roots to their presence in what was initially a hostile environment. True security and recognition come through organization, visible presence, and direct participation in local power structures.

I find that your country [Italy]... I'm probably very prejudiced, but I find them very racist with a lot of things that happen in that country. So it probably isn't, but it's because I see things on the TV and I'm just like «This is how they treat migrants, particularly the black community. Oh, my God». How do you have an attachment? The attachment is doing events, making sure you feel you're part of the community, you know, like if you've got the Mayor showing up to your events, that gives you a bit of recognition, or if there's things where the bigger sort of municipality is involved in that kind of thing. [...] The lack of recognizable spaces like Mosques: this is what makes you want to come here [in London]. I would say that's the case when you freely and openly pray, then that is a problem. But even if you're a secularist, that is also a problem that you can't do something, because you know, you naturally would say, «Well, why can't I?». It does give you a sense of belonging. Again, it's that whole belonging thing.

From Ruksana's account, it is clear that her generation's migration trajectory was marked by irreversibility: for many, coming to London meant accepting that there were no real alternatives other than returning to Bangladesh. That sense of forced permanence led to a different attitude toward attachment to the new context and investment in deep integration strategies. The forced choice – to live here or go back – strengthened the desire to put down roots and the need to actively and collectively build a sense of belonging. In this context, participation in community events, the creation of recognized public rituals, and the visible presence of local institutions at celebrations were not just symbolic gestures, but real practices of social inclusion and citizenship.

For us back then, the other option was go back to Bangladesh. There wasn't another place to go to. So for us, it was permanent. Whereas I think with the Italians, there is another space to go to. Or if it doesn't work out in Italy, they could go to the rest of Europe. I mean the thing is, if you have got another community in the UK where you can go to, that's almost like there is another space that is safe. So then do you need that attachment when you know you can go somewhere else where you definitely know you're going to be part of that.

However, Ruksana notes a crucial difference with the current situation experienced by Bangladeshi migrants in Italy. Today, the migratory experience takes place in a Europe cross-linked by denser transnational networks, where the possibility of moving from one country to another – of “trying elsewhere” if conditions in Italy prove disappointing – loosens the urgency of rooting oneself. This “horizontal mobility”, well analysed in studies on second intra-European migrations, intra-European migratory fluidity and onward migration projects (King 2017; Della Puppa and King 2018; King and Okólski 2019), can weaken, at least in part, the process of belonging and the desire to invest in more complex forms of civic participation, especially where there is institutional resistance to full recognition. Ruksana emphasizes that if, as in the case of Italian Bangladeshis, there is an awareness of being able to rely on a more firmly rooted and recognized parallel community in other countries, this sense of security can compromise the investment of energy in attempts to put down roots locally, prompting people to look elsewhere for support and new opportunities for inclusion. This is a logic of “contingent belonging” – where security and identity do not depend exclusively on success in one place, but on feeling part of a distributed and multipolar diaspora (Dwyer 2000; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006). At the same time, reflections on the importance of schools, commemorations, and the production of educational materials celebrating Bengali history and key moments of resistance in Tower Hamlets show how a sense of belonging is cultivated through public recognition of differences and the valorisation of collective memories. Civic activism and the push for institutional recognition – visible in the ability to organize events, commemorate figures such as Altab Ali, and include Bengali history in school curricula – are elements that have historically transformed Tower Hamlets into an “activist borough,” capable of producing a model of integration based on visibility and the politicization of difference (Modood and Werbner 1997; Alexander 2013). Here, the memory of the migratory

trauma becomes a pedagogical resource and a leverage for a more inclusive citizenship, while the risk remains for Italy that these processes remain more superficial or intermittent – due to greater mobility and the fragmentation of networks.

[...] if the young people are going through the school system, the school also should be celebrating Eid and they should be celebrating Bengali holidays like we do here in the UK. When we've got Victory Day in Bangladesh, people know about it. Or the Mother's Day... we as Tower Hamlets now, we celebrate – no, we don't celebrate, we commemorate the day – and I send out stuff to all schools saying, you know, there's some worksheets that you can work with.

The accounts collected in London converge around a central issue for the Bangladeshi diaspora: the possibility of maintaining and transmitting values, language, and religious identity to new generations. This process, as highlighted by Ruksana's narrative but also, as we will now see, by Tareq's perspective, is by no means a given and depends largely on the degree of cultural and institutional recognition that the community manages to achieve in the urban space it inhabits.

Tareq's voice, in this regard, offers an insight that highlights the active role of parents in trying to mitigate the risk of cultural loss. He recounts how he personally invested time and money to bring together young Bengalis born or raised in the UK, offering them the opportunity to rediscover their mother tongue and receive a religious education, in the hope that this would help them avoid getting lost in what he perceived as “Western” influences: alcohol, drugs, and generational conflicts. Tareq thus plays a role as a bridge between cultures, committing himself to rebuilding circles of belonging in a context where the community remains less structured, more fragile, and still poorly recognized by educational and civic institutions.

First-generation parents, they saw their children going down the wrong path: drinking, drugs, fights... these things aren't part of our culture. We are Muslim, and they were drifting away from religion. So what I did [as a Bangladeshi migrant back then], I paid out of my own pocket and said to the young Bengali boys «Come here, speak with us; I will teach you Bengali as you teach us English». Some of those kids were born here or raised here but were forgetting our language and culture. I brought them together, teaching them my language and giving them religious education; that might help protect them from going astray. If they went astray, they'd lose their identity. But if I brought them into this circle, they could say, «I am Bengali. I speak Bengali. I practice my religion».

Returning to Ruksana's perspective on the subject, the strength of the London community is expressed through a dense network of Saturday schools, cultural associations, mosques, and extracurricular activities that make it possible – and socially legitimate – for symbolic skills to be transferred from one generation to the next. For parents of the first-generation, ensuring that their children learn Bengali and maintain a connection with the Islamic religion is perceived not only as a form of protection against the risks of assimilation and identity loss, but also as a way of offering moral resources and guidance in a context often marked by contrasting pressures. Schools and local institutions, in the case of Tower Hamlets, recognize and support these efforts by organizing events, lectures, and commemorations that legitimize the public presence of Bengali culture and promote integration without erasing differences.

For my parents, it was all about making sure we understood our heritage. Often they told me «You're not white, you're brown». Then they just literally – 'cause we had racism – they'd be like «You're brown. No, you're never going to be seen as white. So you can speak English, you can do all of these things, but you're always going to be... first thing, when someone sees you, they're gonna see brown before you open your mouth. Remember that». And you're kind of going «Okay, no, Mum, no, they're not like that». But actually, they were right. People see, they say they don't, but they do.

This difference between London, where the diaspora's social capital translates into tools for active inclusion, and Rome, where parents often have to informally make up for the lack of public recognition, raises a crucial question about the conditions for intergenerational transmission. Forms of support – whether associative networks or municipal policies sensitive to cultural plurality – prove to be decisive not only for the preservation of language and religion, but also for the well-being of second generations, who are called upon to negotiate their identity between family expectations and external realities.

Ruksana's reflections sound like a declaration of principle that embraces the transmission of cultural heritage far beyond language or religion alone, recalling the idea that rooted identity is, above all, a source of personal and collective strength. For her, the commitment to ensuring that her children know their heritage – consisting of songs, dances, ancient stories, and deep-rooted cultural practices – is not only a form of protection against assimilation, but also a fundamental tool through which new

generations learn to support each other and oppose discrimination and forms of exclusion.

So again, it is about making sure your child understands your heritage and where you're coming from. Because it's such a rich heritage, you know, it's thousands of years old. You've got songs and dance and things that are really important. And so that, when you get a strong understanding of your heritage and it's rich, you can be a confident person. And when you're a confident person, someone can't push you about. You know, it's about resistance again. It's about fighting again, because then you're thinking «No, you can't talk to me like this. I know where I come from, and I know what my heritage is. And no, we all have our richness in our own ways».

Ruksana's account echoes the postcolonial tradition that sees cultural memory not only as a symbolic reserve to be defended, but as a source of agency, a leverage for resistance capable of producing pride, awareness, and dignity even in the most hostile contexts (Hall 1990; Brah 1996). It is knowledge of one's roots, she suggests, that fosters self-confidence: when young Bengalis are aware of the richness of their history and traditions, they are less vulnerable to external pressures, more capable of responding to marginalization attempts and of asserting their presence in their new society as legitimate and valuable. This tension between memory and recognition is not limited to the celebration of a culture of origin, but translates into a practice of daily resistance: it is also through awareness of their heritage that the children of migrants learn to respond to episodes of racism and to claim the right to be different without being inferiorized. In this sense, the transmission of cultural heritage becomes a powerful antidote to self-loss and a driver of empowerment, suggesting that the educational work of families and communities does not only produce nostalgia, but generates tools for self-defence and self-affirmation, which are indispensable for navigating the ambivalences of the contemporary diasporic condition.

When my dad came in the '60s, he always thought he was going to go back to Bangladesh. He was going to go and we were all going to move back and that's where we're going to live. So his mentality was that of a migrant, thinking «I'm gonna go back». But as soon as we went into the schooling system, it became «We're immigrants, we're not moving back, this is your life, because how can I change? Because we're used to this, we're not used to Bangladesh. So the mindset was «We're immigrants now», and the UK, in the backdrop of all the racism, we – you know, dual identity, it has really probably messed up my generation. You know, you're not too sure what you are. Are

you Bengali? Are you British? Are you... what are you? But it's a good conversation because if we're having these things, then we're trying to manage the best of both those cultures.

Ruksana's words reveal how much the sense of attachment to a place – whether Tower Hamlets in London or Torpignattara in Rome – is actually the product of a layering of experiences, sacrifices, and conflicts, rather than simply a residential connection. For many of the second generation, the urgency to obtain an education and overcome the barriers posed by racism and marginalization has meant building a complex relationship with their neighbourhood of origin. Even those who left to study or work, says Ruksana, often choose to return professionally or through civic engagement, feeling a moral duty to give back to the community they came from.

I think the key thing is being politicised. I know, as a second-generation Bangladeshi, we were really pushed to education, and then a lot of us that studied, we came back to Tower Hamlets because we knew we needed to put our skills and our resources to help the next generation of people. So even though some people don't live here anymore, they work here. My sister's moved out, a lot of my cousins have moved out, even though we all grew up here, but they still want to give here because we know what we've come from. We know the hardship and the racism and all the things that we had to do to get our jobs. That you want to help the next generation, but the next generation of kids, they've felt racism but in a different way. There is a glass ceiling of how far they can go in terms of job wise and after that you can't get any higher no matter how good you are. You just can't, it's not gonna work.

What gives meaning to a place is not just nostalgia, but the possibility of making it the centre of new affiliations, practices of solidarity, and political initiatives, even when social or residential mobility physically leads elsewhere. This tension between roots and future horizons, between memories of discrimination and the desire for transformation, appears to be the distinctive feature of the Bengali diaspora in London, and is the real driving force behind attachment, participation, and the construction of an inclusive and active citizenship. This bond is strengthened by the memory of the difficulties faced by previous generations, the struggles to access the labour market, and the limitations that still exist today, although they are often less visible or more “refined” than in the past. Awareness of the existence of a “glass ceiling” – the set of silent obstacles that prevent young Bangladeshis from reaching positions of real power or recognition despite

their achievements – transforms attachment to the neighbourhood into a collective and intergenerational project of emancipation. The motivation is not only individual, but fuels networks of support, mentoring, and internal solidarity, with the idea that every personal advancement should become a shared asset and a tool for redemption for all.

4.5 London's prestige and competitive drive

Following the thread of her reflections, Ruksana highlights how the construction of a recognized and vital space within the city was not the result of a spontaneous nor linear process, but rather the product of slow, often invisible work, composed of small actions and individual initiatives that, over time, became collective heritage. The experience of Tower Hamlets clearly shows that community memory – consisting of stories, photographs, objects, and shared memories – can become a real tool for cohesion, a platform through which to redefine one's role in urban society and claim a public voice. The implicit invitation to the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy is to give shape to these processes: to collect testimonies, to value the history of families who arrived thirty years ago, to involve new social actors – from artists to young professionals – in the creation of projects that recount the collective journey, including through simple tools such as photographic exhibitions or cultural festivals.

I think policy-wise, if the community isn't politicized, that's really what they need to do, because that's where you start to have power. And especially when it becomes a political voice, becomes part of policy and legislation, then you really have power. That's the reason why MPs are important, otherwise they're just idiots. You know, they're, you know, but it's because they have legislative power. They decide how we live. And that comes from, you know, you wanting something good for your community. We carved that space ourselves, the Bangladeshi community, and that will happen naturally also [in Italy]. There'll be someone that's an artist that says «I want to do events, I want to do festivals, want to do this».

For Ruksana, this valorisation of memory cannot and must not be limited to a purely cultural dimension. The London experience teaches us that emancipation and full recognition depend on the ability to transform cultural cohesion into political strength. The real leap forward occurs when the community's demands and narratives manage to enter the places where the rules of coexistence are decided: city councils, legislative assemblies,

representative bodies. Only when the Bangladeshi presence becomes a voice capable of influencing policies – and not simply of being subjected to them – can the process of empowerment take place, allowing the community to redefine not only its image but also its collective destiny.

Continuing her line of reasoning, Ruksana emphasizes how the transnational dimension of the Bangladeshi diaspora contributes to generating a constant flow of references, models, and exchanges between London and Italy, shaping both the cultural practices and the collective imagination of Rome's communities. The movement of artists, musicians, and cultural operators between the two cities becomes a privileged channel for the circulation of shared languages, styles, and aspirations. It is not uncommon, she says, for the most popular singers and bands on the British scene to perform regularly in Italy, fuelling the desire to reproduce successful events and formats such as Boishakhi Mela, the festival celebrating the Bengali New Year.

The Mela, there's also something similar there [in Rome], but it's not as big scale as ours because we've got the local authority, we've got public fundings. There is something in Italy, sort of an outdoor one, and I think there is an element of imitation but in a good way, to say «Well, if they're doing it, we should do it. And we should celebrate that we're here, because we are here». And I think it's not a bad thing.

This interconnection would produce a sort of “creative osmosis”: what happens in London does not remain confined, but can become an example, a stimulus, and often an object of emulation, as in the case of public celebrations and outdoor events which, albeit on a smaller scale than in Tower Hamlets, are beginning to gain ground in Rome. The presence of Bengali television stations, many of which are based in the UK but reach a global audience, plays a key role in strengthening this sense of extended diasporic belonging: images of parties, festivals, and shows broadcasting from London become real tools for cultural validation and the construction of new aspirations for the Italian community.

So I think it is definitely the TV where that happens. The latest forms of technology are creating it. And there's probably lots of followers and lots of people that kind of engage with it as they're connecting. I mean, I know UK artists going to sing in Italy. They go and do events in Italy. So a lot of the UK singers, the musicians, they'll be like «I'm in Italy this weekend, you know», so they're all there. I think because we've got a lot of the Bengali channels

that are global, but they're based in the UK. They're seeing that here and thinking «Well, we should have it, too». It's actually like... it's very natural, wanting to have the Mela that we have.

Ruksana sees this dynamic as a natural and even positive phenomenon: imitation is not perceived as subordination, but as a sign of vitality and a desire for visibility, a way of publicly affirming one's presence and history even in contexts where institutional resources and recognition are more limited. In this sense, the desire to organize a Boishakhi Mela in Rome, to bring Bengali music, dance, and traditions into the city's public space, is part of a logic of constructive confrontation and symbolic assertion: "If they can do it, so can we". New technologies, television channels, and digital platforms intensify these connections, making the manifestations of the diaspora increasingly visible and participatory, and helping to strengthen the bond between the various Bangladeshi communities in Europe. This circulation of cultural models, aspirations, and practices of spectacularization of presence may reflect a conscious strategy of producing belonging, visibility, and collective pride, useful both for consolidating internal cohesion and for negotiating new spaces of recognition in the host society.

Tareq, on his part, offers a very different interpretation of the topic of imitation and internal competition among Bangladeshis than the more optimistic and constructive one proposed by Ruksana. While for her, the emulation of cultural models, events, and celebrations represents a form of collective vitality and positive aspiration, for Tareq, the constant comparison with what is happening in London – and more generally with "successful" Bangladeshis – is a typical characteristic of the most disadvantaged classes of Bangladeshis, typical also of the early period of migration to the United Kingdom, but which now risks turning into permanent tension characterized by envy, rivalry, and the search for social recognition through purely material criteria.

At the beginning they thought «If I bring my son or daughter here, they can compete with the rich people. I'm poor, but if I stay here, my children will be educated, and I can compete». They would speak and write English, and I would return to show you «Look, I have a house and educated children. What's the difference between you and me?». Our only aim in life was to earn and show off wealth. They thought «If I earn money, I can tell everyone, "Look how much I have", and they will respect me». Our people, they think I'm coming because before I came to this country, what was my thought? My

thought was to compete with you. Because you are rich, you are powerful. So how I can compete with you. This is the point I was discussing with another few Bengalis. Like, why we have this? the same Bengali people who stayed together, who fought together against all the bad things and racism. And they did lots of things together. But now they are competing between each other, which is not good. Like if you fight in your house with your family, is it good? No, same is like that. Then I want to know why the mentality is like to compete with each other. You know, we have a nice dress, I have to have a nice dress. You have a nice car, I must have too a nice car.

In his narrative, a sense of unease clearly emerges regarding the transformation of the original solidarity into a competitive race for prestige: the idea that migrant life must be constantly demonstrated, measured, and displayed to other members of the diaspora. According to Tareq, this logic is embodied in everyday gestures such as the accumulation of money, the success of one's children, owning a beautiful home, or acquiring a high status, which thus become not so much instruments of personal or family emancipation, but trophies to be displayed in the community, indicators of social affirmation that nevertheless remain caught between a desire for redemption and anxiety about comparison. Tareq identifies this dynamic as one of the main reasons for the growing individualism that, in his opinion, characterizes the Bengali community in the diaspora: the transition from a collective struggle against exclusion and racism to internal competition that risks fragmenting the social fabric and weakening the support networks that have been painstakingly built over previous decades.

This reading offers a valuable key to understanding the tensions currently affecting the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy, where comparison with the London model, while fuelling hopes and aspirations for growth, also risks accentuating feelings of inadequacy, rivalry, and an exaggerated quest for recognition, often to the detriment of internal cohesion. Tareq's perspective highlights how, among the various Bangladeshi diasporas in Europe, an implicit hierarchy of value and prestige has been created, in which "British Bangladeshis" tend to perceive and present themselves as superior to others, believing that they have a higher level of integration, education, and sophistication than their compatriots who have settled in Italy or elsewhere.

British Bangladeshis they think, you know, they think like «Oh, they [other non-British Bangladeshis] are dirty, you know, I'm special, you know, I'm clean, I can speak better than them». They have always... what is called in English... superiority, something like that, you know, they always feel that

they're the best, superior. In turn, the Bangladeshi-Italian people, they think the people who are living here, they try to compete with them now, and they feel like they're not so bad.

According to Tareq, this feeling of superiority is reflected in a form of mutual exclusion and competition that is often experienced with a sense of revenge or forced emulation. Bangladeshis who grew up in Italy, for their part, feel the need to prove that they are just as good, and this, rather than facilitating the recognition of a shared migratory experience, risks turning into a continuous competition to legitimize one's value through external signs – language, appearance, professional or educational success, the ability to show that one has “made it”.

In an attempt to clarify his interpretation of the tendency he observes among the Bangladeshi diaspora to compete, Tareq is particularly blunt in describing the outcome of efforts to adopt the characteristics and prestige of “others” without truly possessing the same resources or starting conditions, which often results in counterproductive effects: instead of gaining recognition, one risks losing dignity and respect in the eyes of those looking down from London. The search for legitimacy through imitation or ostentation – from moving to London to sharing photos and success stories – turns, in Tareq's bitter reading, into a boomerang that leaves those who pursue it in a state of constant dissatisfaction and uncertainty, unable to find a balance between pride in their roots and aspiration for social recognition.

Not all of them, but most of them, they're like, like, if I am here, I will be a horse. You know, the donkey wants to be a horse. I'll use this example: once, a donkey saw a horse, and the horse looked nice, so the donkey thought «I look similar to him, but the horse is much bigger than me and he can run. What can I do? Everyone likes horses, but they don't like me». So what he did, he wore something which looked like the horse. So he thought «Oh, now the people will think that I'm a horse». So what they did, people tried to respect him, love him, and they treated him like a horse. But when he went to the ground, he couldn't run, you know, he couldn't jump, because he's a donkey. And then people realized «Oh, he's a donkey». So before, whatever respect he had as a donkey, he lost this respect. And people treated him very badly. And he always, until he died, he regretted. So what happened? Some of our people, they're like the donkey, they try to be like a horse. This is the problem. I know they can say «Yes, I was in Rome, now I'm in England». They can send around the nice pictures, you know, about what they will achieve or they have achieved, but that's not the same.

This analysis sheds light on one of the central tensions currently affecting the Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe, which will be discussed in greater detail later on: the need to feel part of a recognized and respected community, on the one hand, and the risk that the frantic search for status and approval will fuel new forms of exclusion and internal conflict, undermining the very bonds of solidarity that made the survival and advancement of the first generations of migrants possible. Those who are in London feel that they belong to a long tradition, that they are carrying on a mission of representation, of maintaining a high level of personal and family honour – even in opposition to those who arrive from Italy or other European contexts, often judged to be “less advanced” or “still behind”. Behind Tareq’s bitter irony lies the deep-rooted mechanism of the need for recognition, the need to stand out and mark one’s position within the communal hierarchy. This is where strategies of invisibility and hypervisibility, the fear of being discredited by others and the desire to appear, to “be seen”, to show that one has made it, often intertwine in contradictory ways. The concept of multipresence – that is, feeling constantly observed and evaluated not only in the context of arrival, but also by relatives, friends, and transnational networks – is a central tool of interpretation here: everything that is done in Rome, London, or Dhaka is read in the light of expectations, judgments, and “gazes” that cross borders. A constant tension therefore emerges between the desire to belong and the desire to stand out, between the need to recognize oneself as part of a common history and the desire to mark one’s uniqueness, between the search for protection and the drive for personal affirmation. It is in this oscillation that much of the dynamics of the diaspora play out, and it is against this backdrop that the events, practices, and narratives concerning Torpignattara and the attempt to build a Roman “Banglatown” should be read.

Returning to Ruksana’s point of view on the relationship between the Bangladeshi communities in London and Rome, her invitation to look to the British model as a possible horizon emerges strongly – not so much to be superficially imitated, but to be critically interpreted as a path of arduous and collective conquest of new rights and forms of recognition. In her words, it is possible to sense a divergence from Tareq’s attitude: where he sees the risk of sterile competition and a race for prestige, she insists on the need to become politicized and enter the decision-making process, to be actively present in the corridors of power.

I mean, in terms of Italy with the Bangladeshi community, I don't know what it needs to be. It might be that often, you know, you've got parents that will do Bengali classes and Arabic classes. I'm sure you have somewhere those classes that they do for their kids because they want them to learn the Bengali culture and they want to learn their faith as well. But you know, when we were growing up, once these guys started to get politicized, there were things that happened in schools. We were doing prayers, we were doing sort of Catholic prayers and Protestant, you know, we were doing English prayers. And once my parents found out, they were like «Well, actually, we're Muslim. We can't pray to another God. Can you take my kids out of this prayer?» And, you know, that's because parents became governors of the school. They were involved in that process to say «Look, we're not saying that you can't do it. We're just saying we don't want to do it». You know, there is a big difference. We're not taking you away from your values. We just don't want to do it.

Ruksana reflects on the profound differences between the two contexts, with the Italian reality being often described even by Italian friends as more backward, less open, and characterized by a cultural and media system that is much more homogeneous and less pluralistic than the British one. This climate, in her opinion, makes it even more important for minority communities – and Bangladeshis in particular – to take action not only on a cultural or religious level, but above all on a civic and political one. Ruksana points out that the presence of Bengali language and culture classes, as well as spaces for religious education, is important but not sufficient: the decisive turning point in the UK came when parents began to become school governors, when they joined school boards and local administrations, to the point where they were able to influence school meal policies, the organization of prayers and, more generally, the rules of daily coexistence.

I mean, regarding racism, my Italian friend always says «Look, UK is way better. Seriously», because for example, talking about what's happening in Palestine, she said «the Italian TV is really biased, you have actually got a measured TV. Don't you complain. You're complaining about something that's really good». And I'm going «But they're not good», and she's going «No, it's good. I'm telling you, in Italy, it is so biased, it's unbelievable. The level of biasness that, you know, there is. There is no... there is no other side».

According to Ruksana, this qualitative leap is also what awaits the Bangladeshi community in Italy, especially in Rome. The prediction – which sounds both hopeful and cautious – is that in the coming years we will see Bangladeshi politicians, councillors, and representatives emerge in

municipal and city councils, figures prepared to speak out on behalf of needs and perspectives that have so far remained on the margins. This politicization will not be a linear or painless process: it will involve resistance, accusations of “takeover”, and even harsh conflicts. But, Ruksana emphasizes, diversity of voices is the only guarantee that Italian society will truly open up to authentic pluralism, and that other minorities will also benefit from the achievements of those who, like the Bangladeshi community, will have had the courage to come forward.

When, you know, there was, in the school menu, there was a lot of pork and there was a lot of non-halal food. The governors came in, the councillors came in and said «Actually, we've got a majority in this, you know, we've got Muslim kids. Can we not have some halal food in there?». Which means they can also eat, because otherwise all they're doing is eating just the vegetables or they're eating fish. So what you're doing is making this accessible to more people. This happened because they were politicized, but also because they were the policymakers. So that's what I think will happen in Italy. When I was seeing all these [Bangladeshis from Italy], I was going «Well, you're going to get an Italian politician, probably Bangladeshi councillor or something, probably in 10-15 years' time, you'll definitely...» because they will say «I want to represent in this area, this Banglatown». They will do it, it will happen. And there'll probably be a very brave soul, someone's going to say, «Literally, the Bengalis have come to take over». So the sooner you're part of the political process, it's a good voice because we need diversity in conversations, otherwise things are never going to get better, we're not going to know more if someone else doesn't say something different. We're just going to follow and follow and follow. So this is a good thing for Italy to have a diverse voice come and say something which other people will benefit. There are other minorities in Italy that will also benefit from that voice saying something because it's a different voice to everybody else.

Ultimately, his analysis suggests that the real leap forward does not come solely from celebrating one's identity, but from the ability to become recognized and respected political interlocutors. The experience of Tower Hamlets teaches that this is the only way to influence policies, build alliances, bring about real change in living conditions, and broaden the horizon of rights, not only for oneself but for the entire city community. Ruksana therefore sees in the Roman experience a potential that has yet to be realized, which can only be achieved through a decisive investment in civic education, participation, and political representation.

4.6 Racism, emulation and belonging

Continuing this journey through other voices and perspectives gathered in London, it is now important to include the views of Sohini, a second-generation singer and the voice of *Lokkhi Terra*, a London-based world music collective that blends Bengali folk melodies with Afrobeat, Cuban rumba, jazz, and South African rhythms, and the perspective of Hasina, who is professionally involved in organizing funeral rituals for Muslims. Both offer an intimate, concrete, and day-to-day glimpse into the challenges and perceptions that the Bangladeshi diaspora faces, both in relation to the British experience and in relation to Italy.

I met Hasina during a gathering at a London community center organized by John Eade together with other researchers, academics, and politically active members of the Bangladeshi community. Initially, given her professional background, I thought our conversation would focus mainly on the issue of Islamic burials, a topic I had chosen to explore in order to examine the relationship between identity, recognition, and the public presence of foreign communities. I had no idea that Hasina had firsthand knowledge of what happens to Bangladeshis in Rome. Only after explaining my research and mentioning Phaim Bhuiyan's movie *Bangla* was I surprised when she smiled and revealed that she was Phaim's aunt.

In line with what Tareq and Ruksana shared, Hasina's voice offers a look at the aspirations and dynamics of recognition that are happening in the Bangladeshi community in Italy, especially in Rome. While, as Tareq has already observed, those living in Italy often feel a sense of distance and admiration towards the London community, which is seen as a model of success, stability, and visibility, Hasina accurately captures how this image translates into a real "race" to bridge the gap, to achieve the status of inclusion, rootedness, and well-being attributed to Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom.

Italian Bangladeshis, I think they think we've got it easy. They see us having our own homes, we have our own businesses. We're established. We're far more established than possibly they have been in Italy. So I think there's a little bit of, you know... I don't want to say negative or jealous, but that's the perception. They can see that we are, we're that 10, 15 years ahead, you know, and that's what comes with having settled communities. [...] they think that we have done very well. People in Bangladesh, when they see here, people going to the UK, London, they see there's more opportunity. That's the difference.

According to Hasina, the London community appears to Italian Bangladeshis as an already consolidated group, with their own property homes, thriving businesses, and a normalized presence in the urban fabric. It is not so much a question of envy or rivalry as a widespread awareness of being “ten or fifteen years behind” compared to the progress made across the Channel, a time gap that shapes the expectations and strategies of those who are now trying to settle in Rome.

[Bangladeshis in Italy] say «I want to own my own activities, my own shop». That makes a huge difference. Huge. I mean, what that would mean is that the community will start to feel settled. You know, they probably potentially there will be a shift in perception of saying, no, we're not going to go back. We're here, we're going to live here, we're going to die here. We're going to. We're going to, you know, then the communities will establish. That's the difference, that when you have the communities owning their space, owning their livelihood, then that creates that level of the confidences to be settled and that makes all the difference, is that when you're settled, then you're comfortable, you're confident, you can relax rather than thinking of going back [to Bangladesh].

This desire to achieve the same level of stability – to “have one’s own shop”, one’s own business, to possess a recognized and secure space – represents the turning point: it is the moment when the community stops thinking of itself as temporary and begins to consider the city no longer as a place of passage, but as its home.

Hasina then insists on a point that, even in previous conversations, had emerged almost as a goal to strive for: the possibility for a migrant community to finally feel “established”, to abandon that condition of temporariness and suspension that accompanies those who always live with one foot elsewhere. In her experience, the real leap forward comes when the collectivity begins to perceive itself as an integral part of the place where it lives: no longer with its mind and plans set on returning or going elsewhere, but determined to stay, to live there, to build a future and even to imagine that this will be the place where it will spend its entire life

The community will start to feel settled. You know, probably, potentially there will be a shift in perception of saying «No, we're not going to go back. We're here, we're going to live here, we're going to die here». Then the communities will establish. The difference is that when you have the communities owning

their space, owning their livelihood, then that creates that level of confidence to be settled, and that makes all the difference. Is when you're settled that then you're comfortable, you're confident, you can relax rather than, in your mind, thinking like «I've got to go back. I've got to do this. I've got to send money home. I've got to do this, I've got to do that». Otherwise, the program you're going on is that you've got anxiety. You know, I mean, I'm close to swearing, but it must be so stressful, so, so stressful having that level of mindset, you know, because you're like, in a way, like schizophrenic.

The transition from precariousness to permanence is not only material, but psychological and social as well: gaining one's own space, a job, a home, transforms collective and individual perceptions, boosts self-confidence, and reduces the anxiety that often accompanies migrant life. Hasina emphasizes how difficult it is to live in a state of constant divide, torn between the need to “send money home” and the desire to invest in putting down roots where you are. This almost schizophrenic tension wears you down and prevents you from enjoying complete peace of mind. Only when the community stops thinking of itself as a temporary guest and decides to belong to the place can it finally relax, feel truly at home, and invest wholeheartedly in its collective future.

Hasina identifies this as the real qualitative leap forward, the same one that Ruksana described for Tower Hamlets: the decisive difference lies in the process of “appropriation” – both material and symbolic – of the urban territory, in the acquisition of that collective confidence that allows people to finally feel part of the city, to live and invest without the spectre of forced return hanging over them. Only in this way, Hasina suggests, will it be possible for the Bangladeshi community in Rome to follow the path of consolidation and recognition that has marked the evolution of the London diaspora: transforming nostalgia and confrontation into concrete planning, rooting the sense of belonging in a stable, visible, and self-determined presence.

Hasina's reflection therefore fits perfectly into the path already traced by Tareq, Ansar, and Ruksana, completing that ideal trajectory that starts with the achievement of material security and ends with full social and political participation. For Hasina, the sense of stability and rootedness is never just a private matter: when a community finally manages to feel “at home”, when a sense of security is consolidated in everyday life and in self-awareness, then space also opens up for a collective leap forward. It is at this point that people can begin to look beyond their immediate surroundings, feeling

empowered to participate not only in the local economy, but also in the political, administrative, and entrepreneurial structures of their country of arrival.

[...] once you feel settled, grounded, that is security, you know, because security comes from all of those experiences in your mental, emotional, you know, shift that happens. You're comfortable, you're secure in who you are, and then, who knows, people get involved in the political system, and then who knows? with that level of security, people may start saying «I'm gonna go and work in the government. I'm gonna stand for...» I don't know, a councillor, member of the parliament, you work in the civil servant, you work in mainstream government, you work for other entrepreneurs, you work for other businesses. You know, you work for mainstream. I can't see why you can't compete at the same level of other your, you know, counterparts, and that's the difference it could make. I don't mean just like having a shop with a street, like a few streets or like a Brick lane. I don't mean that. I mean. I mean much more like really, really penetrate the society.

This transition – which Hasina imagines for the future of Bangladeshis in Italy – mirrors what has already happened in the history of London's communities, as Ruksana and Ansar recalled: first, the establishment of a visible presence in neighbourhoods, then active participation in committees, associations, and schools, and finally entry into institutional representative bodies. In short, rooting oneself in a community does not end with running a shop or buying a house, but opens up much broader possibilities, to the point where the sons and daughters of the diaspora become protagonists of public life, ready to compete on equal terms with their Italian or British counterparts.

Hasina thus urges not to settle for “superficial integration”, consisting only of trade and a visible presence in a few symbolic streets such as Brick Lane, but to aim higher: true transformation occurs when the community becomes an active and recognized part of society, capable of influencing public debate and fully contributing to collective life, rewriting the parameters of belonging and citizenship from within. In this sense, the history of the Bangladeshi communities in London offers a model, but also an open challenge and a horizon for those living today in Rome and other Italian cities.

Sohini's testimony is also in line with Ruksana's reflections, emphasizing how the migrant experience, especially for the younger generations, often plays out on the fine line between integration and discrimination. I met

Sohini during the same *A Season of Bangla Drama* event where I also met Ansar. They had both accompanied us on a guided tour of Banglatown, and Sohini was there to share her story of growing up in the area, as well as to sing some traditional Bengali songs. I asked her if she would be willing to give me her contact details for an interview, but she was not sure, as she did not know if she would have the time or inclination. Instead of giving me her number right away, she invited me to one of her concerts with the *Lokkhi Terra* the following week. So I went to hear her play live. Only after the concert, seeing that I had actually accepted her invitation, did Sohini say she was happy, and we finally arranged our conversation a few days later.



Figure 19 Sohini during her concert with Lokkhi Terra, personal photo taken in December 2023

In recounting the story of a friend who, after a brief stay in Italy, swore never to return, Sohini highlights the widespread feeling of disorientation and vulnerability that racialized people can experience in the Italian context.

One of my friends, she went to Italy once and she was like «I'm never going back». And I was like «why? What happened?». Basically, she was with her children in a shop and I think the shopkeepers were really rude, and told her something like « your children are just like little monkeys». And she's like, «what did you just say? Lots of children are running around and that's what children do, you know, explain why this is an issue here». I wasn't there. But if she says that, then I'm going to trust her, because a woman can tell when someone accidentally bumps you and someone deliberately bumps you, if

someone's being racist, you know. So it was a racial issue. If she says so, then that's what it was.

Sohini also reflects on an essential point: no country is immune to racism, and even London, despite being celebrated as a cosmopolitan city, remains riddled with forms of exclusion and fear of otherness, especially outside the most multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Her personal experience in certain areas of central England, where she suddenly found herself to be for the first time “the only brown person” around, reflects the complexity of a society in which inclusion is never a given but must be continually reaffirmed and defended. However, it also highlights how important it is to defend places where physical and cultural differences are numerically significant and visible.

The general attitude towards anything unfamiliar is one of fear and distrust. There's no, you know, it's not like «Oh, this country is racist and this country isn't», you know, like, London is not immune to racism, but the middle of England... I've been there and been like «Oh my God, why am I the only brown person here?». But the minute you can connect over things like food or music, suddenly we're not scary anymore. So that's all that we can do, right? The political situation, some people think «Okay, the way to do this is to set to local politics». So in Tower Hamlets, for example, here in London you see a lot of foreign populations in local politics because they understand the only way they'll get the things they want is by electing someone who understands their wants and needs and cares about their wants.

These observations not only confirm but also expand on Ruksana's reflections: politicization, collective organization, and institutional recognition become fundamental tools not only for defence but also for creating new spaces for action and representation, especially in contexts – such as Italy – where mistrust and fear of diversity remain widespread and difficult to deconstruct. Sohini's experience, as an artist and second-generation migrant, shows how cultural practices – music, art, collective creativity – can also become vehicles of pride, resilience, and social transformation, helping to redraw the boundaries of citizenship and belonging, against all forms of normalized exclusion.

That's Bangladeshis. Do you know why? Because we're all really proud of being Bangladeshi. And this is like a very curious thing about Bangladeshis, because I remember we would be proud of stuff that I'm just like, «is that really that amazing a thing? It's just a normal thing, isn't it?» But, like, for example, our language, everybody has a language. Everybody loves their own language. But we think our language is the best. This is normal Bangladeshis.

It's like a core belief, right? «Yeah, yeah, of course. Of course. Everybody wants to learn Bangla. Such a beautiful language». You know, it's like another... It's not... They're not putting it on. It's just... It's, you know, it's like «Of course I should sing in Bangla in front of people because, you know, it's beautiful. People will like it». You know, the visibility, there's a lot of pride in our clothes. Like saris. You could probably do one whole anthropological study on just saris.

Sohini emphasizes how the process of Bangladeshi communities becoming rooted in Europe has been marked by a dynamic that is both pragmatic and deeply political. In London, the awareness that there is strength in numbers has translated, over time, not only into participation in local institutions and the emergence of community leadership capable of influencing decisions that affect the community, but also into the creation of commercial networks and the possibility of finding products from their own cuisine in local shops. Neighbourhoods become not just places of passage, but real spaces for investing in identity, where even those who have the resources to “move elsewhere” prefer to stay close to the core of their community, aware that this is the only way to maintain influence, build solidarity, and achieve concrete political results.

Because Bangladeshis here have understood that there is strength in numbers. That's what I meant when I said that they are often in local politics. So perhaps initially they started migrating to certain communities for their familiarities and comforts. For example, I can get my Bengali grocery ingredients here. Whereas if I moved to say, I don't know, Richmond, even if I could afford it, I'm not driving all the way here just to get some *dal*, you know what I mean? So even people who can afford it will stay relatively closer to those communities, even if they move out a bit.

Sohini recognizes that a similar transformation is also taking place in some parts of Italy, such as Sicily, where Bangladeshis have begun to see their neighbourhood not just as a workplace, but as their new home, investing time, energy, and aspirations in its transformation.

As far as the British Bangladeshis are concerned, if they had a specific need, then they need one of their own to make it happen, right? So they come in with a long term plan, which is a good thing, I guess. And I think eventually in pockets that will happen everywhere, because come Bangladeshis have become Italian Bangladeshi. So for example, from what I understand, I haven't been there yet, but the Sicilian Bangladeshis seem to be very invested in their neighbourhoods. In Sicily, it's not just a case of «Oh, I'll go back home and this is just where I live and work». A lot of them for this are like «No, this is my new home and I need to make the best new home I can». So then even

with people here who are entering local politics, that's why they're doing it, because they have adopted this place as their home and so now they need to make this the best home they can. It's not just about working and sending money back to their *real* home.

However, Sohini does not fail to highlight the ambivalence of this process. On the one hand, politicization and community concentration allow for visibility and resources, strengthening the bargaining power of Bangladeshis vis-à-vis local institutions; on the other hand, the creation of cohesive “pockets” inevitably introduces new boundaries, producing inclusions and exclusions that continually redefine who is “us” and who is “other”, even within the same diaspora. Thus, the large-scale arrival of new groups – for example, Bangladeshis who become “Italians” in every sense – is greeted with curiosity, but also with a certain distance, as a presence that is “almost like us, but not really us”.

But because they understand strength is in numbers, Italians see that suddenly there's a group of people that's almost like them, but who are not them, who have arrived *en masse*. Because that's what they do, right? They all help each other out because they think of themselves as one community in a foreign place. So what I find most funny is when you'll hear Bangladeshis, when my Bangladeshi friends are talking, they'll be like «Yeah yeah, there's a foreigner». And I'm like «We're in England. You are the foreigner», right? But the Bangla word for foreigner will remain, no matter where they are. So even if they're in somebody else's country, everybody else is the foreigner. And they're Bengali. That makes sense. So Bengali is no matter where we go. Bangladeshis in particular, no matter where we go. There is a sense of we are one thing.

This tension between familiarity and difference, between inclusion and new forms of exclusion, becomes the core of Sohini's reflection: investing in one's neighbourhood, making the city one's home, means both strengthening the foundations of solidarity and confronting the challenges of internal diversity, competition for resources, and the constant redefinition of community boundaries. In this way, the process of Bangladeshis settling in Italy—as has already happened in England—is not simply a matter of adaptation, but rather a terrain of continuous negotiation, in which a home is built day by day, between memory, recognition, and new questions of belonging, which will sooner or later lead to a positive re-evaluation. Sohini introduces a reflection that shifts the focus to the direction and meaning of diasporic prestige, suggesting that the collective imagination of Bangladesh, historically influenced by the British presence, not only through its colonial

legacy but also thanks to its long history of migration to the United Kingdom, is now undergoing a new transformation. If for decades the model of the “British Bangladeshis” represented, in the national imagination, a predominant point of reference for those who left or those who stayed, something similar now seems to be happening with Italy.

I also wouldn't be surprised if being Bangladeshi Italian becomes a big thing. Just like being British. I say this because even in Bangladesh, Italian food is now a thing, and it is a thing specifically because of this community. Before that, our idea of pizza was... We knew what pizza was, but the only kind of pizza you could get in Bangladesh was like, it was this big and it was a bit like a bread, like a fluffy bread with mincemeat on it and that, for whatever bizarre reason, and I don't know why, always had one pea in the middle. And then all of a sudden we started to get proper Italian food. And I was like, huh, what's... what's going on here? And I started to understand that it was a lot of Italian Bangladeshis coming back home, which I can only assume it means maybe their paperwork didn't work out. I think Italian Bangladeshis in the long term will be a thing, because they found something there.

Sohini recounts, with an amused and astute perspective, how Italian culture is slowly penetrating everyday life in Bangladesh thanks to the active role of the diaspora. This dynamic signals a crucial transition whereby the experience of migration to Italy is no longer limited to the transfer of remittances or labour mobility, but produces its own flow of symbols, practices, and expectations that end up redefining the very imagination of the community, both at home and abroad. Just as happened decades earlier with the long history of migration to Great Britain, the Italian presence today also seems to be leaving tangible traces in consumption, lifestyles, and even in collective narratives about success. Sohini thus imagines a slow but progressive reversal of perspective: if in the past Italy represented for many only a temporary context, to be crossed before returning or leaving again, now it can become one of the hubs where the very meaning of belonging is constructed, producing new models and new references for the diaspora.

It is precisely from this transformation of the collective imagination – in which the Italian presence began to leave visible traces in the lifestyles, tastes, and expectations of the diaspora – that the focus shifts to those who experienced firsthand the transition from one context to another.

Chapter 5 – The transnational perspective

In this section, we will hear from people who, after spending years in Rome, moved to London. Their voices provide additional perspective on the Bangladeshi community in London and offer insight into how it fits into the imagination of those who arrived in Italy as their first stop, what motivated them to leave, what their expectations were, and how they view their decision today, comparing what they thought beforehand with their current experiences.

These accounts show that, while Italy – and Rome in particular – has in recent years become firmly established in the imagination of the Bangladeshi diaspora as one of their possible destinations for settling down, the concrete comparison with London remains central, especially when it comes to imagining the future of their children, social recognition, and a better quality of life. The interviewees often recall how, even before leaving, London was perceived as a place where the Bangladeshi presence is now well established and visible, with models of success that are recognizable even at the institutional and mediatic level. This idea of London as a place of opportunity and inclusion circulated among families long before they left, fuelled by the stories of relatives, friends, and acquaintances who had already made the migratory leap. The contrast with Rome is stark. Rome is often described as a city where jobs are mainly found in the restoration and small retail sectors, with a series of structural limitations that are difficult to overcome. Many speak openly of difficulties related to bureaucracy, residence permits, access to citizenship, and social participation, which, even years later, remains fragile and conditioned. The feeling of being considered “guests”, aliens, remains constant and is often reflected in everyday life, from the school and social situation of children to relations with institutions and the lack of visibility of the community in decision-making fora.

London, on the other hand, is described as a different environment, where the Bangladeshi presence is normalized and recognized even in public spaces. Some express relief that their children no longer feel like the only different ones in class, or that there are Bangladeshi councilors, teachers, and entrepreneurs in the neighbourhood who can serve as points of reference. In London, diversity is experienced as part of the urban and social landscape, not as an exception to be explained or justified. British multiculturalism, however imperfect and often criticized, is seen in practice as a system that offers more concrete tools for the protection of rights, access to services, and

the possibility of building a career and a life plan for oneself and one's children.

The Italian experience, while rich in emotional ties and marked by some progress, has been characterised by subtle barriers made up of exclusionary practices and a sense of precariousness that persists even after years of residence. London is not immune to problems, and discrimination does not disappear entirely, but it offers concrete channels for political participation and careers that are not blocked by being a foreigner. Those who make this secondary migration therefore speak of recognition even before mentioning income; the choice stems from the need to feel part of a place, not just temporary guests.

These trajectories show that moving from Rome to London means searching for a real belonging. Reading the two cities through these lives allows us to question the limits of Italian inclusion policies and, at the same time, to understand how important networks, narratives and collective imagination are in making a future elsewhere conceivable and achievable.

5.1 A transnational perspective on London and Rome and the reputation of the Bangladeshi diaspora

To address the dynamics linking Rome and London in Bangladeshi migration patterns, I chose to focus on four key figures among those I met in London who had previously lived in Rome. The selection of these interviewees, Mohammed, Ashik, Nayeem and Ariful, is due to the fact that, among the many people I met in the English capital, they were the ones who agreed to discuss certain topics in front of a microphone, and with whom I was therefore able to have long and in-depth interviews. Many other testimonies remain in the form of field and mental notes: although they do not appear here directly as living voices, they nevertheless permeate all my analyses and considerations and form the background fabric of this chapter. The four interviewees differ in age and background, but they all share the experience of Italy as their first country of emigration from Bangladesh and Rome as their longest and most deeply rooted place of residence.

Mohammed is now 55 years old and arrived in Italy at the age of 17, initially in Palermo, where he started working as a street vendor before getting his first stall at the market. Entering the world of commerce led him to consider Rome, a city strategically located for import/export and where, as he says, one can really breathe the air of the metropolis, as well as being

the heart of migration for his fellow countrymen. He has now been living in London for seven years, where he has opened a business still linked to the import of various goods, and his eldest son, born in Palermo, now runs an electronics shop in Torpignattara.

Ashik is just under 40 years old. He lived in Rome for sixteen years and has been living in London since 2012, although the first two of his three children were born in Rome because his wife initially remained there. He also works in the commerce sector and explains how it was necessary to move to London once he became a father, although he continues to consider Rome, as we shall see, as a place to return to once his children have grown up.

Nayeem is 29 years old. He was raised in Rome from the age of three and has been in London for almost six years. Even though he is the youngest of the four, he was well known in Torpignattara for his work as a musician at parties, festivals and weddings. But for privacy reasons, as he is easily recognisable, I will not give any more details about him. In his case, the decision to move abroad was personal: after years of trying to get through university in Rome, feeling unmotivated and aware of the difficulties young people face in Italy when aspiring to prestigious positions – difficulties that, as he tells me, are threefold for those who, like him, are visibly foreign - he decided to turn his life around by enrolling at a university in London, and then convinced his parents to sell their shop and move with him a couple of years later. His decision was guided by what he knew about London: the status of foreigners, the recognition of Bangladeshis, the possibility – as he told me – of making the most of his skills, of feeling included, “a drop in the ocean” of difference.

Ariful is 37 years old, and his migration trajectory places him in an intermediate position, both generational and biographical, compared to the other interviewees. He left Bangladesh with his mother in 2003, at the age of 15, to join his father, who had settled in Rome in 1989. His father was one of the very first Bangladeshi migrants to arrive in the Italian capital during that pioneering phase which, as we have seen, marked the beginning of the community's establishment. After decades of living in Rome, eight years ago his parents decided to leave Italy and move to London, driven, as we shall see, by the prospect of integrating into a Bangladeshi community perceived as larger, more established and capable of offering a fuller sense of belonging and recognition than what they had experienced in Italy. He decided to follow them, albeit reluctantly, two years later.

Ariful's voice has also proved particularly valuable thanks to his direct and long-standing experience in both cities, which allows him to make a clear and informed comparison between the two contexts. It is precisely this dual familiarity, gained at different times and in different stages of his life, that enables him to describe both the opportunities and limitations that each city offers to Bangladeshis who settle there.

We will see here how the imagery described through the words of British-Bangladeshis discussed in the previous section, fuelled by social media and family narratives, is reflected both in individual migration strategies and in collective assessments of what is the “best place” to build a future or ensure success for the next generations. There is thus a perceived tacit hierarchy among the various migration destinations: London represents the model of success, the “most famous” and renowned community, the city of residence that confers added value in terms of honour and visibility. This system of evaluation affects not only the choices of individuals but also the expectations that are nurtured from a distance: family reputation and social prestige are built and nourished between the United Kingdom, Italy and Bangladesh, in a continuous flow of information, photographs, judgements and comparisons.

Conversations with them highlight how reputation is a constant source of contention and renegotiation: on the one hand, those living in London tend to emphasise their “superiority” over their Italian counterparts, backed by a longer history of migration, a greater generational presence and more structured access to mechanisms of social recognition. On the other hand, this very display of prestige risks fuelling dynamics of competition and frustration, both among those who feel excluded from certain circles of success and among those who evaluate the quality of life or the effectiveness of inclusion models differently. Those who migrated to Rome, and even more so those who have remained in Bangladesh, perceive and judge these differences, often mythologising or criticising them according to their personal trajectories and their successes or failures. The image that is constructed of oneself, and which is presented to the judgement of others, then becomes a space for constant comparison, in which the legitimacy of the migrant experience is measured not only in terms of social mobility, but also in terms of visibility and the ability to be “recognised”. In this perspective, the value of reputation appears as a cross-cutting pillar, deeply rooted not only in Bengali culture but shared with other Asian societies, where the visibility of personal success immediately translates into prestige

for the entire family group. Interviewees clearly express this logic: migrants do not represent only themselves, but an entire network of relatives, acquaintances, childhood friends and fellow villagers who follow, evaluate and comment on their every step and choice. London therefore offers the opportunity to “show” success – not only to oneself or one's children, but to the entire diaspora community – through recognisable parameters: home ownership, the level of education attained by one's children, participation in religious life, and economic security.

At the same time, this myth of London as a place of opportunity and inclusion is constantly being tested and redefined, in comparison with the Italian experience and with the partial or definitive returns of those who decide to leave the United Kingdom for Italy (or vice versa). Not everyone feels at home in England, and the narrative of the ideal city falls apart when you experience the daily difficulties, the competition within the community (which we will discuss in more detail), or a model of multiculturalism which, while offering visibility, also requires a greater ability to integrate into a highly structured and politically active social fabric. All four remain attached to Italy even after moving, feeling part of a network that spans both contexts and leaving open the possibility of returning, especially in times of crisis or dissatisfaction.

What emerges forcefully from the interviews is that the comparison between Rome and London is not limited to a simple contrast, but generates a multiplicity of possible horizons, a continuous negotiation between expectations and reality, between personal success and collective recognition. London, in the eyes of those who live in Rome or those who have recently emigrated, remains a space of “critical mass”: the numerical and political strength of the Bengali community translates into an ability to influence the rights system, access to services and presence in the public sphere. This is also reflected in the central role that Bangladeshi political associations have been able to acquire in the London context: the possibility of interacting directly with the Bangladeshi government, receiving official visits and building political bridges that still seem remote and often inaccessible in Rome. Those who have achieved leadership positions abroad do not only represent an individual achievement, but also become mediators and points of reference for the entire diaspora, capable of influencing national politics. While in London the deep-rooted presence, politicisation and visibility of the Bangladeshi community have made it possible to access resources and spaces of public recognition – such as participation in local

institutions, the celebration of religious and national holidays, and the construction of solid associative networks – in Rome the situation still appears to be evolving, more fragmented and subject to processes of invisibilisation. The critical mass in London translates not only into greater bargaining power, but also into a more articulated possibility of “building community” and responding collectively to the challenges posed by integration and interethnic coexistence.

5.2 Reputation, image, competition

Ariful, in his reasoning, brings to light a particularly relevant dimension for understanding the logic underlying both the spatial concentration of Bangladeshis in Rome and the persistent role of the London image as a point of reference. His reflection moves along two interconnected planes: on the one hand, the widely shared desire within the diaspora to recreate conditions of collective familiarity through residential proximity; on the other, the persistent centrality of London in the diasporic imagination, not only as a destination for migration, but as a paradigmatic model that continues to orient references even where there is no physical movement.

This thing about how we tend to stick together more than others, to all gather in the same neighbourhoods... It's interesting. We've always had this tendency to want things our own way, maybe even a bit too much, if you know what I mean. I mean, maybe because it's difficult, I don't know. But I see it in the mentality of my relatives and others too¹⁸.

Ariful then describes the multi-level trajectories that characterise contemporary Bangladeshi migration, identifying Italy – and more generally continental Europe – as a genuine intermediate space: an initial landing platform for those who do not immediately have the economic, social or legal resources to aim directly for the United Kingdom, but who remain permeated by a latent drive towards what continues to be perceived as the “promised land”.

When people want to improve their lives, they head for England. Why? Because by now we're at the seventh or eighth generation of migrants, so more or less, whatever you're looking for, you'll find it there. Why England? Because at this point, we've already paved highways for this whole system,

¹⁸ The interviews with Ariful, Mohammed, Ashik and Nayeem were conducted in Italian, so the excerpts presented here are my translations.

it's all mapped out. In between, you've got Europe: Italy, Spain, France. If you've got a little money and you want to go abroad, but you don't have quite enough to get straight to England, you go to Italy first. It's like a stepping stone, a platform, and from there you try to make your jump to the promised land.

Hence the dialectic between two possible strategies: either complete the migratory leap and reach London at a later date, or, where this is not feasible or convenient, replicate the conditions of liveability and recognition by building a sort of micro-London on Italian soil.

So, when you arrive in Italy and realize you can't get all the services you might have in England – because they've been there longer, there are more services, more people, they're more politically organized – you have two options. Option A: you keep your head down, do the hard work, and then you leave for somewhere you can actually get what you were looking for. Option B: even though now it's harder because it's not as easy as it used to be, with Brexit and everything, you try to create your own ideal situation: basically, to recreate England in Italy.

It is precisely in this sense that Ariful interprets the transformation of Torpignattara: a form of collective appropriation of urban space that allows for the numerical concentration of fellow countrymen, services, economic activities, cultural resources and social support networks.

And how do I do it? I build it up by creating concentration, getting lots of people together, so there's strength in numbers. We bring over relatives, friends, people we know, even without organizing it formally. But in reality, we're creating our own London in Rome. So we set up everything we need, right there. Obviously, if we were all scattered, it would be much harder for us to do this, or even just to get close to it. That's why we all cluster together in one part of the city and build our own little micro-London inside the city, where you're self-sufficient. You don't even need to leave the neighbourhood if you don't want a non-Bangla experience. That's the dream, the peak: if you can't make it to England, you build something that's almost the same. So that in that neighbourhood, you know you can find everything you need, and you never have to leave.

In this urban micro-geography, one can find everything necessary to continue feeling “at home” while being elsewhere. In the imagination, just as London's East End allowed the first generations of migrants to structure a densely organised diasporic space, Torpignattara ends up taking shape as a

Roman version of that same model: not yet institutionalised as a real Banglatown, but already sufficiently articulated to support a fabric of activities, symbols, relational networks and forms of local prestige. It is precisely this reference to prestige that allows Ariful to explain even more clearly the mechanisms of recognition and positioning that run through the Bangladeshi diaspora between Italy and the United Kingdom. While London has long been the place where success stories destined to circulate in the homeland were produced, today, he says, there is a conscious attempt to build forms of visibility and authoritativeness within the Italian scene as well. In a sense, the hierarchical logic that has traditionally distinguished the “lucky ones in London” from the “secondary migrants” in Italy is now being challenged precisely through the public display of their entrepreneurial success and their role as local leaders. In this light, we should interpret both the investments made to appear in the Bangladeshi media and the organisation of public festivals, cultural events and opportunities for political representation, in which Rome becomes the stage for a new diasporic centrality. No longer just a place of transit, but a space that allows people to claim belonging, authority and symbolic capital without necessarily having to go through the London recognition process.

Since London has always been the goal, both back home and among Bangladeshi migrants, I get to a point where I want to prove that even if I didn't make it to London, you can't call me second class anymore. Now I'm category A. How? Because I take photos, I make videos, I do things. I even pay journalists fifty euros to make a video about me, and then they show it back in Bangladesh, because that gives you prestige. It's all about showing people, letting everyone see: «look, even if I didn't end up in London, I've made it too».

Against this backdrop, there is a further dimension that is particularly relevant to understanding how the relationships of prestige and representation within the Bangladeshi diaspora are gradually being reconfigured, not only between Rome and London, but also with regard to the channels of community visibility towards Bangladesh itself. While the political and symbolic centrality of the diaspora was once concentrated almost exclusively in England – as we will see later in Nayeem's words – thanks to its greater numerical weight and the now well-established links between the diaspora community and Bangladeshi political circles, today we

are witnessing a gradual redistribution of this influence towards more peripheral nodes, such as Rome.

In the past, for political parties, the main foreign headquarters were always in England, because that's where most people were and everything was more connected. But now, you can do all that here too. Now I'm a businessman in Italy, I have money, shops, several businesses. But more importantly, I have a lot of people I can influence. It's not anymore just a few of us doing things on the sidelines. Now we organize cultural festivals and events, and I'm the one in charge. I'm the leader, the one running things, bringing people together. So, when I'm the one appearing on national TV, you're not just «the guy who didn't make it to England». No, you're someone who's succeeded here, on the same level as those making it in politics in England.

In other words, the objective goes beyond simply reproducing the London model of residential settlements and ethnic infrastructure; what is taking shape is a claim to full legitimacy in the production of diasporic symbolic capital within the Roman context. The public events it organises, the cultural festivals it chairs and the carefully constructed media visibility – sometimes even buying television slots and journalistic services aimed at the Bangladeshi media – become strategic tools through which to fuel the circuit of transnational recognition that still closely links the European diaspora to its country of origin. In this context, success is no longer measured solely in terms of geographical location, but in terms of the ability to assert oneself, wherever one may be, as a central and influential figure in the fabric of the diaspora itself. For Ariful, therefore, appearing in the national media in Bangladesh, managing diverse economic activities and mobilising numerous community networks in the Rome area is tangible proof that diasporic prestige is no longer the exclusive prerogative of London's pioneers. In this sense, the Roman space, once perceived as secondary or a fallback, can now become a fully competitive platform for the production of diasporic status and visibility. In Nayeem's view, one of the first differences perceived by those who move between Rome and London concerns the historical depth and generational stratification of the Bangladeshi presence in the British capital. He points out that in London, the community has now achieved a solidity and rootedness that goes back four or five generations, with some families present since the 1940s, when the first waves of migration were still directly intertwined with postcolonial dynamics. This demographic and symbolic factor, which clearly distinguishes London from Rome, produces a perception of greater authority and legitimacy on the part of Bangladeshis in

London, who feel strengthened by a long history of presence and social and political achievements: it is not just a question of the length of time, but of a kind of accumulated historical capital, which is reflected in greater confidence in asserting their identity both in public spaces and within community circles.

The Bangladeshis in London, you know, they show off a bit more, because they're the ones who've actually been here longer. Like, here you've got, what, four or five generations of Bangladeshis in some families. In Rome, it's more like two or three. Because here in London, they've been around since the seventies, the sixties – even back in the forties, during colonial times, people came over. So yeah, they really have been here longer.

This narrative is also reflected in Ashik's experience, who describes how the relationship between the two communities is constantly nourished by transnational communication flows and family ties. For many Bangladeshis who have settled in London, ties with Rome remain strong, both for family reasons and because of their shared memory of the Italian migration experience as a fundamental stage in their journey. The impression that emerges is that of a genuine relational and symbolic infrastructure, where the transition from one city to another does not translate into a simple break, but rather into a continuous exchange of information, experiences and expectations. The existence of family networks spanning several generations and countries allows new arrivals to quickly access social capital that facilitates integration and offers a sense of identitarian continuity.

I mean, people living in Rome, they know what's going on here. You can see it, there's communication all the time between people here and people in Rome. Loads of my nephews and cousins, they've been here since the seventies. That's why.

Mohammed, on the other hand, insists on the central role played by the prestige and notoriety that the Bangladeshi community in London has earned, both in the eyes of those still living in Bangladesh and among those residing elsewhere in Europe, including Italy. The reputation of the London diaspora – built on accumulated economic success, social visibility and public recognition – exerts a force of attraction and legitimisation that transcends national borders. Today, as he points out, the image of those who move to London is immediately associated with the possibility of social advancement, professional fulfilment and visibility in the society of arrival,

thanks in part to the amplifying power of social media, which makes every move, every success or failure, immediately visible and commentable by relatives and acquaintances thousands of kilometres away.

Yeah, the community in London, it's more famous than the one in Rome. People know it, the people here, people back in Bangladesh, everyone knows London's got more prestige. Like, for example, today, there's someone from my family who just moved over here. They know, you know, depending on the job, on the situation, on how people live... stuff like that. That's how it is. And now, with social media, it's even easier, you know?

Continuing the analysis on the theme of prestige, competition and the value of reputation within the diaspora, the testimonies collected highlight dynamics already discussed above, but which are particularly evident among those who have experienced multiple European contexts.

Nayeem, for example, reflects disillusionedly on how economic success, once achieved, quickly becomes a source of distinction and competition within the community. Achieving a certain position, the fact of “making it” even in material terms, is immediately interpreted as a sign of superiority and risks fuelling attitudes of ostentation and a spiral of comparisons that resonate not only among peers but also in transnational relations with Bangladesh and other diasporas.

It's like, you know, when a kid gets famous, right? Success goes to their head. They come to Italy, make a bit of money, and what do they think? Oh, I've made money, I'm better than the others. I'm better than the others. It sounds bad to say it, but let's be honest... it's kind of a political thing. Because if you help someone like that, then that person goes and tells their relatives back in Bangladesh, right? Like, «Yeah, he helped me out». And then your name, you know, it's more well-known. Because people like that, they're still always thinking about being the best out of everyone they know.

The prestige acquired is also consolidated through public recognition of actions in support of other members of the community: helping someone to migrate or find work translates into a return in terms of image which, thanks to accounts circulating among relatives and acquaintances back home, helps to build or strengthen one's reputation and status. In this sense, reputation – which Nayeem defines as a real pillar of Bangladeshi culture and, more generally, of many Asian societies – is an essential resource for defining

one's individual and family position, a sort of social capital that guides behaviour, choices and relationships.

That's everything. Reputation and image, when it comes to Bangladeshis, that's everything. It's something that's really rooted in our culture. Reputation, for us Bengalis... but honestly, for Asian societies in general, not just South Asians, Asians in general... like, even Japanese, Chinese, for them too, reputation is everything. It's just fundamental.

The same logic emerges in Ashik's reflections, where he attributes added value to London not only in terms of material opportunities, but above all as a place of greater cultural openness and opportunities for exchange.

[My brother] came to London in 2009, and he started to tell me «Things are better here, there's this big, vibrant culture. In Italy, it's still kind of small, things are just starting out. Here, there's real multiculturalism, you really feel it. It's just not the same as Italy; over there it's all still a bit small, more... basic. Here, it's different, there's just so much more culture, so much more going on». So honestly, people do kind of think London is better.

The story of his brother urging him to join him in London is intertwined with the perception, widespread among many interviewees, that the British capital represents a "bigger", more dynamic environment capable of offering opportunities for fulfilment that still seem limited, "natural" and restricted in Italy. Yet this narrative of superiority is not all-encompassing: Ashik recognises that the decision to move does not necessarily mean a definitive condemnation of Italy, but rather the search for an environment where he can broaden his horizons. At the same time, it is clear that the question of which place is "better" is constantly being evaluated and discussed among migrants, often oscillating between nostalgia, realism and projections for the future.

Italy's still there, Italy's not finished. Some people think it's over. Sometimes friends or old colleagues I used to work with, they call me and say «Ah, good for you, you did the right thing leaving, Italy's finished now, everything's better over there [in London]». And I tell them «Are you kidding? No, Italy's still there».

Mohammed, from his side, highlights how London's positive image is strongly conveyed by the stories of those who have already moved there. The narrative circulating among the diaspora attributes a series of specific

advantages to London – from its focus on social policies to the quality of education and opportunities offered to families – which ultimately reinforce the symbolic and material appeal of the British capital.

Before I came to London, I already knew about it from what people who'd already been there would say. They used to say «It's better over here... Number one, for the kids' education, and also for religion. Even the government helps you here. They give you, you know, even with rent, you only have to pay a part of it, they help out with that too».

This image, conveyed and confirmed through social and family networks, contributes to fuelling expectations and migration strategies that see London as a sort of ideal destination for those aspiring to greater visibility, stability and recognition.

The perception of what is happening in the British capital and its opportunities is shaped by a web of shared impressions, expectations and information that circulate ever more rapidly today thanks to social media. Mohammed points this out without hesitation: what was once passed on by word of mouth is now available to anyone, anywhere. People in Bangladesh, Italy or already in London know in real time “how things are going” in the various diasporas. The differences between countries, between systems, between the opportunities offered to migrants, are now common knowledge even for those who have never left their country of origin. People learn how the welfare system works in England, how to access social housing, what opportunities there are for their children in terms of education, and even what the welcoming atmosphere is like in different neighbourhoods of London compared to Rome.

Now we talk about social media. These days, people know everything, not just in Bangladesh or London, but all over the world. With social media, they know how things are in different countries, they know about the situation of their culture, the systems, what people do... they know it all. People are really up to date now, it's not like it used to be. Young people, especially, they're even more up to date than before.

Their perspective shows how this vision translates into concrete strategies, a desire to move, and choices that are often no longer linked solely to work but also to the search for status, social recognition, and prospects for their children. Mohammed emphasises that in England, the perception is that the system is more accessible and fair, bureaucratic procedures and the

functioning of public institutions are considered more efficient than in Italy, where it is possible to be stuck for months without knowing why, having to resort to a lawyer who ultimately just collects a fee. In this comparison, the experience of Italian bureaucracy is often cited as a negative example, reinforcing the appeal of the British model, which is perceived as more transparent and reliable for new arrivals, while the Italian system is more based on cultural intimacy and the social capital enjoyed by the native population.

People know how the government works in England, they know how things work. But in Rome, you go to the immigration office, you ask for information, and one person sends you to another person, who sends you to another. I know two or three people here who've been stuck for over a year. They didn't even know why they were stuck. No letters, no emails, nothing. They're just left like that. Then they get a lawyer, and finally the lawyer comes out with the documents... but of course, the lawyer takes the money. It's crazy, the whole paperwork system there. Here, the office has the documents, they've got the mail, they've got everything.

Reflecting on colonial history and the Asian presence in the two countries, Ashik observes how multiculturalism is now an established reality in England, while Italy still feels small and provincial, with multiculturalism not yet fully recognised or valued. English, as a second natural language for young Bangladeshis who grew up in London, represents a further advantage and a sense of belonging compared to those in Italy who have to fight every day for the right to be considered part of society.

The idea was... you know, because here in England there are so many Asians, so many Bangladeshis. You know, that's the first thing. Because when there was colonialism in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the British were there so from that time, Bengalis, Indians, Pakistanis started going there. And another thing: here, you have more opportunities, we speak Bangla, but our second language is English. So we understand English right away.

Nayeem's comments take the issue of competition, reputation and emulation among peers from different diasporas even further. Friends who have remained in Rome closely observe those who have moved to London and often aspire to "do the same", to follow the same path, fascinated by stories of success and the possibility of becoming part of a larger, more recognised community.

There's competition, you know? For example, my friends in Rome, they see... okay, one of my friends who's still in Rome, now he's watching videos from here, right? Two years ago, when I came here, he was still in Rome, and he told me «Yeah, when I come to London too, we'll open a bar together, all of us, yeah?» You get it? That's the typical Roman mentality, you know?

These dynamics, which are now amplified by the instant circulation of information online, are also at the root of growing mobility among diasporas. Young people who see their peers “succeeding” in London are driven to try the same path, bringing with them hopes and expectations, but also the awareness that the competition is not only about material well-being, but above all about social recognition and the prestige that comes with it.

So yeah, because... well, my friends who stayed in Rome, after they... I mean, after they saw that a lot of people here in London have managed to become successful... especially in the last few years, because there's been this wave of people coming over... they really noticed that.

The stories of those who “made it” thus become a powerful driver of mobility and transformation, but also a source of pressure and new forms of rivalry.

Now that we're here in London... like, you know, guys who are 24, 23 years old, they see that we're doing well. I mean, when I say “we” I mean, like, young people in general, you know, Italian-Bangladeshis, we're doing okay here, and they want to do the same back there [in Italy], and they're slowly starting to do it. There was this doctor in Sicily – this guy came from Bangladesh, I think he was an orphan, I don't really remember – he came with nothing. There was this professor, I don't think he adopted him, but he kind of helped him out, and then he became a doctor, like, he studied and went on to become a doctor. Because, you know, when you come from nothing, you have even more will to do something, to be better than everyone else.

Nayeem then attempts to explain to me the central importance of prestige and reputation in the Bangladeshi diaspora, using the example of the logic that governs associationism and political participation among his compatriots in Rome. In this part, he explains how the political commitment of those who engage in debates and meetings related to the main political parties in Bangladesh is driven, in most cases, not so much by a genuine desire for influence or concrete change, but by a deeply rooted desire for

public recognition, visibility and family honour. Endorsing a party, regularly attending meetings, holding office or simply being close to political leaders – all this translates into symbolic currency that can be spent both in the community of residence and in the transnational diaspora circle, with effects that are felt as far away as Bangladesh.

The endorsement from a political party doesn't mean shit, except for the fact that people know you, that's it. Even my parents spent money, money and more money, right? I don't even know why, just to have a good reputation. London is really different from Rome, because here you've got all the European headquarters for the parties. The thing is, if you become a president abroad, like a party president, you can actually get a meeting with the prime minister of Bangladesh. For example, in Italy, there's a president in every city, right? And then there's the Italian national president who's in Rome. But the prime minister? He comes to London way more than he does to Italy, honestly. The European president is here in London, and of course he has real power... if he wants, he can influence politicians back in Bangladesh. But the ones in Italy, they're just "Italian" politicians, you know what I mean? In the end, it's all about reputation. I've got a good reputation, I'm respected in the community, and I'm happy with that.

It is this need to accrue respect and a good reputation that guides many of the strategic choices made by Bangladeshis in Rome, where the real reach of political action, unlike in London, remains very limited. Recognition by the community, being remembered and cited as role models, remains for many an essential goal, a form of social capital that is passed down from generation to generation and justifies material and symbolic investments, sometimes substantial, in their public positioning.

5.3 Perspectives on Bangladeshi migration to London and Tower Hamlets

The testimonies of Ashik, Mohammed, Nayeem and Ariful offer a disenchanted and poignant insight into the profound differences that characterise the condition of Bangladeshis and, more generally, of foreigners in the two national and urban contexts. London is described as a place where the principle of legal equality seems to be applied in practice on a daily basis, making it natural for people with different backgrounds to live together, whereas in Italy, these differences often remain imprisoned in rhetoric and ambiguous institutional practices. The shared perception is that, in the United Kingdom, respect for the law does not bend to ethnic or religious affiliations:

being Asian or British, Muslim, Hindu or Christian does not change the substance of the rules or access to fundamental rights.

Nayeem looks to the long history of the Bengali diaspora in England as a model, an almost obligatory destination in the migrant imagination: the colonial tradition has cemented the belief that London is the ideal place to build a future, especially compared to Italy, which is perceived as a recent destination and not yet fully open to difference. However, he also recognises that the experience of migration is marked by compromise and disillusionment: life abroad does not guarantee easy wealth, and the duty to support families back home adds further pressure to the journey of every migrant.

Bangladesh used to be a British colony, so for generations there's been this idea that London is the ideal place to be. Even though, honestly, for many at the beginning any place abroad seems better than staying in Bangladesh. But later, the truth is, when you actually move abroad, you realize it's really tough, it hits you hard. It's not like people make tons of money, because everyone living abroad has to support their own family and also send money back to Bangladesh.

Ashik similarly points out that in England, the presence of communities originating from the Indian subcontinent, documented since the mid-19th century, has made religious plurality commonplace in the public sphere. The presence of Islam – and more generally of South Asian religions – is deeply rooted: mosques, Islamic centres, Hindu and Sikh temples, and churches of all denominations are ordinary features of the urban landscape, tangible signs of a history of migration that has its roots in the colonial period.

Here you also have Islam, Islamic culture it's been here since colonial times, since 1757, when England entered Asia. In England, you find lots of mosques, lots of Muslims. There's a real Islamic culture. In Italy, it still needs time. In some areas yes, for example in Torpignattara there's the TMC¹⁹ but it's still not much. But here in the UK, wherever you go, you find mosques, Hindu temples, Gurdwaras, churches. In Italy, you find churches, but not mosques. Why? Because in the UK people have been here since the 1800s; in Italy, most only arrived in the 1990s. Before that, there just weren't any.

Ashik then insists on another point of difference: in Italy, the existence of a law does not necessarily guarantee its equal application to all. Rules can

¹⁹ One of the six informal Islamic prayer rooms in Torpignattara, which we will discuss later on.

be changed for expedient reasons, criteria can vary depending on circumstances or the individuals involved, and this fuels a sense of precariousness and exclusion that is reflected both in social life and in prospects for integration.

The system here, there's just one law: you're British, I'm Asian, but the law is the same for everyone. In Italy, there is a law, but then sometimes you change tables and the law changes too. That's a problem, it's crazy. This mentality has to change. I say Italy is moving forward, but the people in charge still need to realize they have to think about foreigners too. They have to integrate them. Foreigners pay taxes, they pay for everything. If they don't pay taxes, the country can't move forward quickly. Everyone needs to work together, on the same level. That's it, just change the mentality, that's all it takes.

In London, by contrast, legal certainty helps to consolidate a coexistence that is also evident in the urban space: the Bengali diaspora is part of the landscape, visible in every neighbourhood, from Whitechapel to Brick Lane, in a distribution that conveys the image of a truly multicultural city, where the coexistence of mosques, temples and churches is not the exception but the rule.

Torpignattara is a bit like Whitechapel. Whitechapel is full of Bangladeshis. In Brick Lane, before, there were a lot of Bangladeshi restaurants. Now, not so many... now just a few left. But in London, wherever you go, you find Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian communities. In Italy, in Rome, most Bangladeshis are in Torpignattara, Piazza Vittorio, Centocelle, a bit around Tuscolano... but in other parts, there are only a few. In some areas you'll find them, but just a small number.

Mohammed, for his part, emphasises how the migrant experience in London has produced a public mindset capable of recognising plurality, starting with the school system. In England, he says, the possibility for children to wear religious symbols and practise their faith is not only formally guaranteed, but is experienced as a shared normality: diversity is not stigmatised or sanctioned, but integrated into the fabric of social relations.

The mentality in Italy is a big problem. But in London, no one can say «I'm a British citizen and you're a foreigner, you're Asian». No, that's not how it is. But in Italy, this is serious: kids get thrown out of school. That's not only

the government's mentality. No, of course. But this happens in Rome. Even for kids, you know, there another big problem is religion. Kids can't go to school how they want. In London, you saw it: here, they can go with the veil, anyone can follow their religion. Not just Muslims, all religions. In Rome, if a girl goes to school wearing the veil, other kids make jokes, make fun of her, give her a hard time. But over here, you can't do that. You go around the way you like, I go how I want, kids don't look at you, everything is normal, everyone is equal. That's what I saw. You saw it too, right?

In Italy, on the other hand, discrimination can even affect the youngest members of society, as in the case of girls who are expelled from school or mocked for wearing headscarves: a symbolic distance that translates into a feeling of marginalisation in everyday life, which is difficult to overcome even for the second generations.

So, in Rome there are kids, not just Bangladeshi, but kids from other countries, other families. It should work just like it does in England: kids should be able to go to school easily, start from school and live their whole lives there. All the opportunities should be the same for everyone, everything. Not just «Oh, he's Bangladeshi, he's Pakistani, he's Italian, he's African»... no. It should be like a family. Whoever lives here belongs here. This country [Italy] needs to grow, this community needs to grow. All of that. That's... that's how I see it: it should be a country with a real community, with everything, a country that looks forward.

Again according to Ariful, the London experience presents itself as a context in which the condition of otherness gradually diminishes until it dissolves into the ethnic diversity that characterises the urban landscape. The massive and historically rooted presence of Bangladeshis, together with other South Asian minorities, has created a framework in which skin colour or cultural background no longer, or at least much less, constitute a discriminating factor in access to housing, work or social recognition. In this sense, Ariful's observation about the greater ease with which one can find a rental property in London without being rejected on the basis of ethnic prejudice accurately reflects this horizon of normalisation, made possible by the long history of South Asian communities in the United Kingdom.

It's true, you really do feel more included as a Bangladeshi in England, at least within the community. We always use that word, "community", and there's a reason for it. Like I said before, there have been seven or eight

generations doing this, so if you're looking to rent a house, they don't just say «Sorry, it's already taken» just because you're brown.

In contrast, Rome still appears to be a context in which the young age of the migrant population continues to produce effects of fragility, making migrants more exposed to the risk of discriminatory selection by the native population. The temporal distance between the two diasporic experiences translates, in other words, into a structural distance in terms of concrete opportunities for inclusion and social mobility. While in London Bangladeshis are fully integrated into the mosaic of established urban identities, in Rome the process is still in its infancy and, as several interviewees pointed out, needs time, numbers and further generational consolidation.

Because, you know, in London you're just one out of so many, it's a bit easier. But in Italy, even today, it can still happen that they say no just because you're different. Same thing if you want to stay in your own circles, have your own comforts, have your own spaces to pray: it's just easier to find those things in England than in Italy, because people have been there longer, they've contributed, they've helped create an environment where all of that is more accessible.

It is in fact in the possibility of cultivating a dual identity, of feeling “at home” even in public spaces and not only within the walls of one's own home, that Nayeem identifies the main advantage of London over Rome. In London, the normality of difference is reflected in freedom of movement and expression, in a public sociality that does not require people to negotiate every gesture or hide their identity. In Rome, this condition remains a goal to be achieved, and the perceived distance between the two worlds continues to mark the biographical trajectories and adaptation strategies of Bangladeshis between the two cities.

In a way, when you have this double identity, you actually have more possibilities, more freedom to move around. So, in a way, [moving to London] creates a space where things feel normal, where you're not so visible or singled out. I mean, I really thought about this, you know? But in some way, it's about the public or social dimension, the fact of being in a place or another. It's not just about doing what I want at home; I'd like to have a social life in a public space where, you know, I can just be myself. That's really needed in Rome... Yeah, here in London it's normal, but in Rome, not yet.

When comparing the expectations generated by stories of migration with the conditions actually encountered in London's East End, this experience fuels both admiration for a system capable of offering real opportunities and disappointment with Italy's still incomplete migration process, which remains fragile in terms of infrastructure and recognition mechanisms. It is precisely in this distance that London continues to play its role as a symbolic and concrete destination, where the possibility of not only being present but also represented appears fully accessible, albeit not without new internal stratifications.

In his talk, Ashik translates this perception into a continuous comparison with the Italian context. On the one hand, he emphasises how the Banglatown area represents a much more visible Bengali hub than Torpignattara, both in terms of size and political and social structuring. On the other hand, however, he observes how the centrality of that neighbourhood also entails high costs, which push many of his compatriots to settle in more peripheral areas, such as Newham, where he lives, which are characterised by a more diverse composition.

I'd like to live in Banglatown, but it's expensive there. There are a lot of our people there, but it's just too expensive. Here [in Newham], most people are Pakistani and Indian, while over there, there are lots of Bangladeshis. But it costs too much.

In his interpretation, the strength of these settlements is not merely a question of numbers, but is manifested above all in the ability of Asian minorities to become fully integrated into the public and institutional dynamics of the city, even reaching the highest positions of political power. Ashik points out that the rise of political figures of Asian origin, such as British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who is of Indian descent, is a tangible example of a model in which historically established diasporas have gained full legitimacy within the national decision-making system. This is an achievement that, in the eyes of my interlocutors, remains a remote prospect in Italy, where control of political structures continues to be the almost exclusive prerogative of the native majority, and where the full inclusion of migrants in the spheres of formal representation still appears far from complete.

If the city council and the government really started working seriously, I'm telling you, Torpignattara... that would be the way forward. Italy would do

really well, but they need to work together, the council and the government, to create opportunities. [...] You know, the English and the Americans, it's not just about money, they've got brains, too. They've gone all over the world. Look now: in England, the prime minister has Indian roots, Indian background. In Italy, we're not there yet. The people in charge need to change their mentality. They need to move forward, and fast. Italy needs to aim high. What I mean is, like, everything should be organized online, everything digital, everything more modern... to become a modern country, a country that's ready. Things should be done in an organized way, not everyone just doing their own thing: me doing it my way, you doing it your way. Now, look at the prime minister in England: he's got Indian origins, he speaks... Rishi Sunak, right?

This distance is not only perceived on a political level, but also affects the practical functioning of administrative institutions. Ashik, as Mohammed had already done, returns to the efficiency of British bureaucracy, emphasising how the United Kingdom appears to new arrivals as a context now fully oriented towards digitalised administrative procedures, where most paperwork is done online, without the need for lengthy visits to different offices, queues, indefinite waiting times or unclear requests. But in this reference to technological “modernity”, there is also, more subtly, an implicit criticism of the Italian bureaucratic system, which is still marked by opaque “artisanal” practices and margins of discretion that leave room for forms of outright clientelism or racism.

Mohammed accurately exemplifies this frustration, comparing the speed of British procedures for residence permits – which can be managed almost entirely from home and within a definite timeframe – with the precarious situation experienced by many of his acquaintances in Italy, who are forced to wait months or years to regularise their status.

One of the most important things is the government system, how things work here. Let me give you just one example: in Rome, just to get a residence permit, you lose a year, six months, seven, eight months, a whole year just waiting. But in London, you don't have to go to the immigration office, you don't have to go to any office. I can do everything from home, easily, in just a day, actually in just an hour you can do everything you need, send in all the documents. There's no need to go to the offices. Only for a few things do you have to go in person, like for fingerprints: they give you the date, the time, the appointment, you go, get it done, and come back, you don't waste time. That's way more efficient than the things you see in the offices there.

Mohammed contributes to further clarifying the terms of this perceived distance between London and Rome, introducing a nuance that recurs insistently in the interviewees' statements: the vision of London as a space that not only hosts a numerically large and well-established Bengali diaspora, but also integrates it into an urban and political landscape that is by now fully global. The presence of communities from multiple backgrounds – Indian, Pakistani, African, and of course Bangladeshi – is seen by Mohammed as a tangible reflection of an advanced multicultural model, in which different presences are not an exception but the very backbone of the urban fabric.

They talk about Banglatown in London, but it's not just Bangladeshis there. There are a lot of us, really, a lot, but there are also people from other countries, Indians, Pakistanis, Africans... everyone's there. But yeah, most of the people are from Bangladesh. There's a real Bangladeshi community, there's a lot of us. People can help each other out. That's why people decide to go there, because there are so many people who can help you.

In this representation, Banglatown and the entire Tower Hamlets district take on an emblematic value: not simply as a concentration of a single diasporic community, but as a symbol of the city's ability to absorb, normalise and integrate ethnic plurality within its own logic of government and representation. According to Mohammed, the very structure of the local council testifies to this well-established inclusiveness, with political leadership largely representing the Asian minorities themselves, from Pakistani mayor Sadiq Kahn to Bangladeshi and Pakistani councillors, who have gradually occupied visible and recognised positions of representation. From this perspective, the political participation of migrants and their descendants appears to be a natural outcome of a system designed to function on a global scale, a system that feeds what Mohammed significantly calls "the world mentality".

Almost all the council politics are run by Bangladeshis. Now there's even an Indian prime minister, and the mayor of London is Pakistani, there are so many Pakistani and Bangladeshi councillors. That's why I say it's not just Bangladeshis here, there are also people from other countries, Africans, people from all over. That's what I mean: there's so much culture in London, you really feel like the world is growing together here. Countries grow because people have a global mindset. But there, it's only the Italian mentality that grows. Not a global one. That's not how things work there. If people

thought more globally that country could really move forward, just like London has. But that's exactly the problem: it's the mentality.

In an implicit comparison with Italy, this “world mentality” becomes the real dividing line between two divergent trajectories. While in London, the deep roots of foreign communities translate into their full participation in social and political processes, in Italy – and in Rome in particular – Mohammed continues to perceive the persistence of a more closed cultural horizon, dominated by a mindset incapable of redefining citizenship in a pluralistic way. Once again, it is the distance between a city that perceives itself as part of the world and a country that remains trapped within its own internal framework.

The diasporic infrastructure that Bangladeshis find in London can also be interpreted in practical terms: the density of the community provides mutual support resources, social networks and valuable information for those who arrive and need to navigate their new environment. The relational capital of the diaspora functions here as a kind of collective leverage that makes the impact of migration less uncertain. This is also why, Mohammed observes, many choose London as a place to settle: they know they can count on a community that already occupies crucial spaces for integration and guarantees more structured and immediate forms of support than those available in Italy.

5.4 Torpignattara, cohesion and representation

Whilst London represents for many of my interlocutors the paradigm of full citizenship and mature institutional inclusion capable of recognising the historical presence of South Asian communities, Rome, and Torpignattara in particular, occupies an intermediate position, suspended between the vulnerability of those still struggling for visibility and the consolidation of progressive and increasingly visible rootedness. It is precisely in Torpignattara, in fact, that the Roman Bengali community has found, over the years, a sort of urban negotiation space, a margin of maneuverability which, although not yet translating into full participation in the institutional circuits of power, nevertheless allows them to publicly express their presence and to showcase, in an increasingly assertive manner, the aspects of their cultural repertoire that they choose to activate and make visible.

In conversations, the centrality of Torpignattara emerges strongly as a place which, despite being peripheral to the dynamics of city power, has been

able to transform itself into a symbolic centre of Bengali life in the capital. Unlike other areas of the city, where the foreign presence is more dispersed or socially fragmented, Torpignattara allows Bangladeshis to live in a neighbourhood densely populated with fellow nationals, with access to an extensive network of commercial activities, religious centres, language schools and cultural associations that produce a social fabric capable of supporting everyday migrant life and mediating its complexities. It is above all through public visibility, street parties, weddings celebrated in public spaces, religious processions through the neighbourhood streets, Bengali New Year celebrations and activities organised in Islamic centres that Torpignattara takes on the character of a progressively conquered space in their eyes, where they can express, albeit still within partial boundaries, a social and cultural legitimacy. These public practices thus become a daily and material form of negotiation of the right to coexistence, in which the occupation of urban space is equivalent to the actual construction of informal citizenship, which is measured on a daily basis against the resistance of the surrounding social and institutional environment. While recognition in London has come through a long process of institutionalisation of diasporic presences that is visible in local politics, in the presence of political representatives from the same country and in the colonial memory, in Rome recognition still comes through the strength of numbers, the density of relationships and the ability to make one's existence visible in urban space. It is a visibility that, as my interlocutors tell me, still involves tensions and negotiations, but which at the same time represents one of the few resources available to consolidate their social space in a city that, on an institutional level, still remains distant from the model of formal inclusion that the migrant imagination associates with the British context.

Ariful's experience offers a window into the process of Bangladeshi integration in Rome, seen through the eyes of someone who, although not technically part of the second generation, found himself spending his early teenage years at a time when the community was still in its infancy. His arrival in Rome in 2003, as the son of one of the first Bangladeshi pioneers to arrive in the capital in the late 1980s, placed him in a liminal position: not fully integrated into the first nucleus of adult migrants, nor part of the subsequent group of children born or raised entirely in Italy. When he arrived, Torpignattara had already begun to take on a certain centrality as a reference point for the diaspora, but had not yet reached the level of densification and visibility that would characterise the next phase. Ariful's

family initially settled in Centocelle, which he significantly describes as “the soft version of Torpignattara”, pointing out that an internal gradient was already emerging within the city in terms of Bangladeshi concentration. Although Torpignattara was not yet the widespread and recognisable Banglatown of today, it was already the place where it was most likely to meet fellow countrymen, forge community ties and rebuild a semblance of familiarity in the new urban context. The language difficulties that Ariful recalls when he entered the Italian school system clearly reflect the still marginal and pioneering nature of the Bangladeshi presence among his peers in those years.

My dad came over in 1989, and of course, Torpignattara back then wasn't anything like what it is now. When I arrived in 2003, we lived in Centocelle, which is now like the softer version of Torpignattara. At that point, if you wanted more contact with the community, you already had to go to Torpignattara, that was the place, the main reference point for Bangladeshis. But I was in Centocelle, and at my high school, there were only two Bangladeshis: me and another girl. Honestly, at the beginning, I didn't even speak a word – well, three words – of Italian: *ciao*, *grazie*, and *vaffanculo*.

His account lucidly illustrates how his cohort represented, in fact, the first wave of young Bangladeshis able to complete upper secondary education in Italy, when there were still very few of their peers. The extent of their loneliness and lack of peer networks is latent: without a critical mass of boys and girls from the same background, their adaptation to school and society largely took place in isolation, without the mediation of an ethnically familiar environment that could act as a buffer zone in the integration process.

In this still uncertain and dispersed phase, Torpignattara neighbourhood began to take on an initial role as a gravitational pull, a nucleus around which to start building a minimal community network capable of supporting, at least symbolically, those who arrived. His experience of high school with a single Bangladeshi classmate becomes emblematic of a transitional phase in which the demographic structure of the community had not yet generated, except in an extremely limited form, a true second generation. In the early 2000s, the children of migrants were just beginning to reach secondary school age, while most Bangladeshi families living in Rome were still composed of adults who had arrived in the 1990s to enter the labour market directly.

I mean, it was just me and her, the only two Bangladeshis in our class, and then there were other foreigners, of course, but no other Bangladeshis. First of all, because of our age... in 2003, there just weren't any other fifteen-year-olds from Bangladesh in Italy at that time – the second generation hadn't really been born yet. The first generation who came were already a bit older, they were here to work.

The absence of Bangladeshi peers presented a subtle but crucial challenge: the lack of people with whom to share common experiences and difficulties. As Ariful points out, back then it was not easy to gather information on how to continue studying after high school, navigate the Italian university system, or imagine career paths that went beyond those already taken by their parents' generation. Without informal networks for discussion and peer support, even the most ordinary educational steps became complex and characterized by loneliness.

So we were kind of like pioneers in high school, because the other kids were younger and not in high school yet, so there weren't any Bangladeshis at that level. Or the ones a bit older than us came as first-generation migrants, so they were working. It was hard to find people who had the same interests as me. For example, I didn't even know how to go to university. After high school, I did everything I could to find other Bangladeshi kids from my generation to talk to, to connect with, to share experiences with...

Ariful's retrospective description of his active search for other Bangladeshi youths with whom he could share his experiences testifies to a general need for social interaction, but in particular to the need to build a space for jointly addressing the challenges of being young migrants or children of migrants in a city which, despite being on its way to becoming one of the main Bangladeshi diasporic centres in Europe, in those early days still offered few opportunities for interacting, exchanging experiences, feeling less alone and understanding together how to navigate a still unfamiliar environment.

Mohammed, who arrived in Rome during the pioneering phase like Ariful's father, also reflects on the transformations he has witnessed first-hand in Torpignattara over the years, describing a landscape that has changed radically since his early days in the capital. At the time, he says, the passage along Torpignattara main street offered a glimpse of a semi-deserted street, where only a handful of foreigners animated the public

space. Today, on the contrary, the scene is one of lively ethnic diversity, where the Bangladeshi presence, alongside that of other migrant communities, has come to give the neighbourhood a recognisable social character, consolidated over time by the subsequent arrival of family members and compatriots in a cumulative process of reunification and creation of family networks.

When I first arrived in Torpignattara, there were hardly any foreigners. Just a few, really just a handful. If you walked down Via di Torpignattara, from the corner to the traffic light, you wouldn't even see ten, maybe five foreigners. Now it's full, it's really crowded. The increase in foreigners in Torpignattara is not a bad thing. Now there are so many more foreign people. Little by little, that kind of culture is starting to grow, but it's really only in Torpignattara that things have changed like this. If you go to other areas, you don't see it the same way. That's how it works: first I came, then my sister-in-law, then her brother, then his brother-in-law. That's how it goes for everyone, Bangladeshis, Indians, Africans, all the same. It's become an area where more foreigners live; in other neighbourhoods, you don't see as many. [In Torpignattara] you can choose the kind of life you want to live. Because it's us, by living there, who made it this way.

Mohammed's story offers a valuable insight into the evolution of Torpignattara as a genuine process of collective production of urban space. It is the profound meaning of the expression "we made it this way" that conveys the active and voluntary nature of the foreign community's establishment in this Roman neighbourhood. From this perspective, Torpignattara is not perceived as a Banglatown in the strict sense, nor as a space carved out solely around Bangladeshi identity. Rather, what emerges from the narratives of its inhabitants is the idea of a neighbourhood that represents, perhaps more than any other space in Rome, that rare terrain where foreigners manage to play on an almost equal footing with the Italian population. This is not so much because the space was predisposed to welcome them, but because it was they themselves who, day after day, shaped it, made it liveable and familiar, gradually transforming it into a context in which they could live without constantly feeling like guests or outsiders.

It is precisely in this dimension of space production that Nayeem's reflections fit in, offering a more explicitly political reading of the phenomenon. For him, in a way quite similar to what Ariful said on this aspect, the transformation of Torpignattara recalls a sort of "miniature

London”, but not in the sense of a deliberately planned project, one guided by some leader, but rather an organic process in which the possibility of creating events, parties and cultural manifestations arises from the desire to revive elements of one’s diasporic experience, transmitting fragments of memory and belonging to younger generations. Politics, he suggests, is not the driving force behind this evolution, but represents an interrelated and parallel dimension, a consequence of a community that gains space and visibility through shared social and cultural practices.

Turning Rome into something like London, building the political ground for that, I think this kind of transformation is organic, you know? No one’s really making it happen on purpose, it just comes about because... well, because you want to give your community space and freedom. It’s not like people are trying to force this cultural change, it’s more like «I’d love to organize this event for my community». Why? Because when I was a kid, we used to do things like that, and it made me feel good, you know? But Bangladeshi kids nowadays, maybe they don’t know all that, they don’t know everything. So it’s nice to show them this side of the community, or this side of their culture, more than anything, right? So it’s something that just happens naturally. Politics comes as a consequence.

In this perspective, public celebrations, cultural events and collective moments of expression become tools through which to reaffirm a visible presence in the urban space of Rome, marking the legitimacy of a right to public existence that goes beyond mere demographics.

Ashik, in particular, insists on this point, highlighting how the cyclical repetition of celebrations such as Bengali New Year, concerts and traditional food banquets not only allow children born in Italy to maintain a link with their family roots, but also play an educational role for the entire host society. Where these moments of visibility are recognised and supported by institutions, a potential space for more mature intercultural dialogue opens up; where, on the contrary, they are hindered or tolerated with ambiguity, they risk remaining confined to a marginal dimension, exposed to constant misunderstandings or stigmatisation.

The festivals, the concerts, the food, the Bengali New Year, they should do more of those. If they organized these things a bit more and gave a few more opportunities, the kids growing up would know where their parents and grandparents came from, that they came from India, Bangladesh... That way, they’d know their culture, you know? If they don’t have these festivals, these cultural events, once or twice a year, then everything just gets forgotten. But

these things are needed, they're important. It should be like it is here [in London], because some people think «When my kids grow up, they'll change religion». Now, even in Italy, in Rome, there are a lot of kids who end up following a different religion, a different culture. It happens here too, but a bit less than over there. That's because here the community here is a bit stronger. The community keeps an eye on things, a little bit.

Ashik's reasoning touches on a central issue in the logic of diasporic reproduction: the cultural continuity of second generations. He recognises that in Rome there is a trend, perceived with a certain concern by adults, towards a possible cultural “dispersion” of the younger generations, attracted by other symbolic or religious horizons. However, in an implicit comparison with London, Ashik sees in the cohesive force of the local community, which is numerically more consolidated and better equipped with organisational tools, an element that can partially contain this drift by offering protected spaces for socialisation and identitarian transmission.

Yeah, people look out for each other. For example, I have a son, someone else has a son, and if they see him around... they let you know. They'll say «I saw your son here, or there, with these friends, in that place». So after a while, I know about it, I hear what's going on. But over there, it's not like that. When the kids go out, no one knows where they are, because there still isn't a strong community yet. Yeah, it'll take some more time.

In community networks, the informal circulation of information within large and widespread collectivities allows parents to know who their children are spending time with, where they are going and with whom, in a collective system that compensates for the lack of a broader social structure for the protection and support of families in Italy. It is this capacity for self-organisation that, in the eyes of many, marks the difference between the Roman experience, which is slowly gaining ground, and the London one, where the size and organisation of the diaspora already allow for higher levels of protection and cohesion.

On the other hand, the growing population density and physical proximity that characterise Torpignattara also respond to material and “concrete” needs. The concentration of Bangladeshi families generates a constant demand for specific goods and services, feeding a strongly ethnicised neighbourhood economy. Ashik insists on this aspect, explaining how the existence of places of worship, specialised grocery shops and restaurants meets daily needs that Italian commercial circuits are unable to

satisfy. The ability to find what one needs is a decisive factor in maintaining community cohesion and strengthening a sense of belonging to the area. In this sense, the presence and expansion of such commercial activities not only contribute to the symbolic self-sufficiency of the community, but also have a positive economic impact on the Italian state itself, generating revenue.

It's important to have a place, a neighbourhood where you've got everything: mosques, shops, restaurants, all the things you need... Because, you know, for us Bangladeshis, it's important to have places where we can buy our own stuff. In regular supermarkets, you just don't find all the Asian things. If you go here to Tesco or Sainsbury's, you find Asian products, Italian stuff, European food... you find it all. But over there, in Italy, you still don't find those things. It's true, isn't it? There are so many things Italians, Europeans, Asians can't get in regular supermarkets. That's why you need grocery stores, Asian shops, you know? Places where you can find Asian products. Restaurants are important too, they sell food, people eat, and they pay taxes. That's good for Italy, for the State. The Italian State collects those taxes.

Nayeem, for his part, offers an even clearer interpretation of the mechanism through which Torpignattara established itself as the epicentre of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome. His narrative traces the gradual shift of the community's centre of gravity from Piazza Vittorio, historically the first settlement for many migrant communities, to Torpignattara, as more new arrivals populated the neighbourhood and the ethnic commercial infrastructure grew. In this process, the logic of emulation and reputation plays a key role: opening a new shop, he explains, is not just an economic decision but a gesture that brings prestige within the group, fuelling a virtuous circle that encourages others to follow suit, further strengthening the neighbourhood's centrality.

My friend Fabian, his mom has a clothes shop, it makes sense to open it in Torpignattara. Why? Because there are more people there. Why? Because it's the hub for Bangladeshis. People who want to go somewhere, they go to Torpignattara, everybody knows that. It's like Piazza Vittorio²⁰. Before, it was all about Piazza Vittorio, but then, when the Chinese community started getting more active there, little by little people moved, and the Bangladeshi community shifted to Torpignattara. It's that thing, like «He opened a shop, good for him», and that's where you get into the whole thing we talked about before, about honour, or whatever you want to call it.

²⁰ Piazza Vittorio is the main square in the Esquilino district, in the first Municipality, and represents the first urban area in Rome where Bangladeshis began to settle in significant numbers in the 1990s (see § 2.).

But once again, it is above all the public dimension of cultural and religious events that constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of community reproduction and the construction of collective visibility. Festivals, concerts and celebrations are not only recreational or folkloric moments but represent crucial opportunities for intergenerational transmission and public education, both for the new diasporic generations and for Italian society at large. Nayeem's reference to what is happening in Torpignattara is not just a statement of simple community activism, but touches on a deeper issue of cultural roots and continuity for the new generations born or raised in Italy. In his view, the festivals, programmes and public events that animate the neighbourhood take on a meaning that goes far beyond simple ritual celebration: they are everyday devices for the reproduction of identity. For those who, like him, have lived in Italy since childhood, these spaces offer a real opportunity not to lose touch with a cultural universe that would otherwise risk remaining distant and abstract, reduced to a memory mediated by family stories or sporadic trips to Bangladesh. The importance of these public moments in Torpignattara is therefore twofold: on the one hand, they allow younger generations to familiarise with customs, practices and cultural codes that would otherwise risk being diluted or erased; on the other, they make this identity visible within the urban space of Rome, removing it from marginality or simple invisibility. In a sense, Torpignattara functions as a hybrid space where, through the public action of the community, a form of belonging is made possible that does not require an exclusive choice between Italian and Bangladeshi identities, but allows for the complex articulation of both.

What happens in Torpignattara is really good for the community, because it keeps the energy and the buzz alive. I mean, think about it: if you're in a place that's not your home, and there's nothing around to remind you of home, how would you feel? But there, with these festivals, these events happening all the time... even the ones where I used to go and sing, it's great, because people like me... I came to Italy when I was three years old. I'm Italian, I grew up in Rome. But at the same time, I still have my Bengali roots. Why? Because I used to go to these places, I was part of these communities and all of that.

It is also in this arena that the theme resurfaces, already evident in their perception of the difference with London, of the need to guarantee adequate spaces and stable public opportunities. Nayeem reflects on how, for many of his peers who grew up in Italy, that bond has already been partially

weakened. These are young men and women who, despite having Bengali origins, rarely visit Bangladesh, often only every three years or even less, and who, once there, even struggle to communicate with their relatives because the Bengali they speak is fragmentary, learned indirectly and imperfectly, in a sort of mirror image of how many adult migrants in Italy speak Italian. His personal situation, that of someone who has maintained full linguistic proficiency in Bengali, Italian and English, can be traced back to the specific choices of his parents, who always insisted that he grow up with this triple competence, precisely in order to safeguard his Bengali identity alongside his Italian one. Without these tools, Nayeem observes, second generations would be destined to see that part of themselves that connects them to their context of origin disappear. In this sense, the neighbourhood is not only a place where migrants are concentrated, but also becomes a laboratory for transnational cultural continuity.

It's the same for some kids who came to Italy when they were really young, or who were born here and don't have any real connection to Bangladesh. Maybe they go there once every three years, and when they go, they can't even talk to their relatives. Some of my friends speak Bengali the same way immigrants speak Italian, you know? They can get by, but they can't really speak it. Luckily, I can speak Bengali, Italian and English fluently, because my parents always thought it was important from when I was little, for me, to keep my cultural identity, my Bengali identity. There are so many things that feel totally normal to me, but for an Italian person, they seem completely out of this world.

Following the same line of thought, Ashik also believes that the public staging of these rituals serves as an educational tool for Italians themselves, who often have not yet had the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of Asian cultures due to the relatively recent presence of Asian immigrants in Italy.

Yeah, yeah. More people need to come forward and do these things. That's what's needed. If people don't do it... because, you know, Italians still don't really know Asian culture the way they do here, the way white British people know it here. It's still new, Asians only started coming to Rome and Italy in the '90s. But if they organize these New Year's events, these festivals, Italians will see, the government, the State... little by little... Yeah, things change. Because they see it and think «Oh, this is the culture». Because if you always hear about war... Africa, war here, war there... after a while it feels like it's always just war there. But now people shouldn't think everyone's like that.

We need to do something positive. Having a Banglatown in Rome would be a really positive thing not just for foreigners, but for Italians as well. It would help Italians become less racist, more open-minded. People need to start thinking differently, thinking in a more modern way, not like it's still the 1900s or 1800s. It's time to move forward, to have a more open attitude.

The need to guarantee public opportunities and adequate spaces for the transmission of memory and community rituals, which emerges in Nayeem and Ashik's reflections, is emblematic and helps to understand the dynamics that seem to guide the Bangladeshi settlement in Torpignattara. The neighbourhood becomes the daily scene where the very possibility of cultural continuity is played out, a space where language, practices, habits and memories are deposited, transformed and made available again to generations born or raised in Italy.

Nayeem's observation of the gradual loss of language and identity among many of his peers shows how maintaining some link with Bangladesh, in a sense of dual belonging, remains a shared goal between parents and children, but one that is always at risk of gradual erosion: without cohesive contexts, without places where individual trajectories can come together and recognise themselves as part of a common thread, that link with Bangladesh ends up weakening, leaving the migrant experience exposed to the risk of being emptied of memory and continuity.

The public celebration of Bangladeshi festivals, rituals and practices, in addition to keeping alive the bond with their origins, also has an educational value for the outside world, gradually opening up avenues of knowledge and opportunities for encounter with Italian society. Ashik, in line with the other voices, insists on the need for a change in mentality among the native population, and believes that realities such as Torpignattara, with its visible forms of difference such as public festivals, as well as cementing the Bangladeshi community, can serve as an opportunity for exchange and openness, helping to dismantle stereotypes and mistrust, a device through which Italians come into contact with an Asia that escapes the usual image of poverty, marginalisation and escape from war, and instead manifests itself as a normalised, everyday presence. A constant thread therefore runs between London's East End and Torpignattara, made up of comparisons and projections, where the experience accumulated in London continues to offer a model to strive towards in the search for visibility, autonomy and recognition in Rome as well. The quality of life in the diaspora is measured by the availability of shared spaces, recognisable rituals, but also reliable

bureaucratic mechanisms that do not reject diversity. Everyone describes London as an “ecosystem already calibrated to differences”, thanks to the work of numerous generations of compatriots who have been able to prepare the ground, as Bangladeshis in Rome are called to do today. The British capital represents the fulfilment of a model in which collective density has enabled the diaspora to gain political representation, attract media attention and fuel a steady flow of symbolic capital to Bangladesh. London thus represents the accomplished model of a now stabilised migrant presence, with recognised institutions, public visibility and generational continuity. Torpignattara, although lacking that long historical stratification, remains the only urban context in Rome where the foreign presence manages to establish itself with a similar degree of ease, offering on a smaller scale the possibility of experiencing the established forms of everyday life that characterise London’s East End, with its specialised mini-markets, prayer halls and public festivals. London continues to provide the archetype of a fully recognised diasporic *civitas*, where “strength in numbers” has been decisive for the public recognition of Bangladeshi identity, which has not derived from abstract institutional benevolence, but from the combined action of demographic density, local entrepreneurship and political negotiation of everyday life. Torpignattara shows that a similar trajectory can germinate elsewhere, a testing ground: a territory where models of coexistence, tried and tested elsewhere, are reinterpreted under different administrative constraints.

In the following pages, the research penetrates the heart of the Roman neighbourhood. We will understand how the quest for public recognition – a recurring theme in the voices collected so far – translates into everyday urban practices, how Torpignattara is perceived by the Bangladeshis who have not yet left the neighbourhood, what alliances are formed between old and new residents, and to what extent the desired “micro-London” manages to overcome regulatory barriers and local reluctance.

Chapter 6 - Torpignattara as a hub of diversity

The chapter that follows aims to shift the focus directly into the fabric of Torpignattara, at the heart of the dynamic that has made this neighbourhood one of the most emblematic laboratories for observing how the Bangladeshi presence – and more generally the foreign presence – negotiates its living space and legitimacy in the city of Rome on a daily basis. After exploring the perceptions of British-Bangladeshis and the stories of those who have experienced both sides, Rome and London, and observing how the comparison with the London model constantly serves as a yardstick and horizon of aspiration for the Bangladeshi diaspora, it is now necessary to take a further step to understand how, in the concrete reality of Torpignattara, these aspirations, comparisons, and settlement strategies take shape.

Before delving into the details of local trajectories, it is worth briefly reviewing the broader context that separates – or rather, distances – the two urban contexts in terms of migration policies and opportunities for civic and political inclusion. As we have seen, it is precisely this distance that underpins much of what transpires in the everyday practices observed in Torpignattara.

6.1 The different policy frameworks

In the United Kingdom, the attitude towards integration has historically been influenced, as seen in the first chapter, by the multiculturalist approach – with all its ambiguities, fluctuations and revisions – and by a complex regulatory framework ranging from the Race Relations Acts of 1965 to the Equality Act of 2010, establishing a legal system that recognises and attempts to protect the rights of ethnic minorities. Migrants from Commonwealth countries (such as Bangladesh) and, until Brexit, EU citizens, enjoyed the right to vote in local elections (Johnston and Manley 2016; House of Commons Library 2024), favouring more immediate political inclusion than in Italy, where, in addition to residence, Italian citizenship is required to vote even at the local level.

The United Kingdom has developed a series of public policies dedicated to social integration, with a particular focus on community cohesion, reducing ethnic inequalities and supporting the socio-economic inclusion of minorities. Although there is no single centralised agency dedicated to this issue, integration is managed across various government departments and ministries. The 2016 *Casey Review*, which drew attention to the risks associated with forms of static multiculturalism, with communities locked into separate trajectories and limited opportunities for interaction, formed the basis on which Theresa May's government first produced a consultation document, *the Integrated Communities Strategy*

Green Paper (2018), which led to the development of the implementation plan the following year, the *Integrated Communities Action Plan* (2019), defining a new framework for action that, in its stated intentions, would be geared towards greater “cohesion” (Lalot et al. 2021; Touihri-Mebarek 2022). The strategy developed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) defined an approach in which integration is conceived as a bidirectional process, in which both migrants and native citizens share responsibility for building inclusive communities based on common rights, duties and opportunities (Touihri-Mebarek 2022). The 70 operational measures contained in the *Action Plan* cover various areas: targeted English courses for adults with low literacy skills, pilot interventions in highly vulnerable areas, interfaith dialogue initiatives, programmes for the economic empowerment of South Asian migrant women, and measures against social isolation and employment barriers for certain groups²¹. In parallel, the United Kingdom has activated tools for analysing and monitoring racial inequalities. The *Lammy Review* (2017), an independent report on discrimination within the police and criminal justice systems, found significant racial bias in the UK justice system, particularly towards BAME people, while the *McGregor-Smith Review* (2017) investigated employment barriers for ethnic minorities and drew up recommendations for employers in the public and private sectors to make their workplaces more inclusive. In 2017, the Cabinet Office launched the *Race Disparity Audit*, a government survey that collected detailed data on the employment, education and health outcomes of different ethnic groups and published them on the *Ethnicity Facts & Figures* portal to promote evidence-based policies and hold public bodies accountable for inequalities. The adoption of this statistical infrastructure is a distinctive feature of British policy, which allows, at a minimum, for continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of interventions and persistent critical issues.

Linguistic and civic integration has constituted another strategic focus. The government has maintained and, in part, expanded ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programmes, which are considered essential for the social and occupational autonomy of adult migrants. Specific initiatives have targeted particularly vulnerable groups, such as Bangladeshi housewives living in Tower Hamlets, who often have poor English language

²¹ Information and programmes related to the integration and inclusion of British and London residents were drawn from an analysis of the official websites of the City of London and the Trust for London, available at london.gov.uk and <https://trustforlondon.org.uk>. A quick overview of the main measures mentioned can be found at <https://www.queensu.ca/mcp/immigrant-minorities/resultsbycountry-im/united-kingdom-im>; <https://images.london.gov.uk/m/48aab1cfe70525f/original/Social-Integration-Measurement-Toolkit.pdf>; https://tfl.ams3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Citizenship_and_Integration_Initiative_-_Final_report_-_October_2019.pdf and https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c628e8bed915d043966be2f/Integrated_Communities_Strategy_Govt_Action_Plan.pdf.

skills (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018). At the same time, acquiring permanent residence or British citizenship continues to require passing the *Life in the UK Test* and official language exams. However, progressive cuts in public spending in recent years have had a negative impact on part of the ESOL offer, a phenomenon also noted by the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which reported a deterioration in language standards in schools for foreign students (Solano and Huddleston 2020). Education is one of the areas where British policies have produced the most visible results. Despite the absence of programmes focused on teaching languages of origin, the school system has gradually reduced performance gaps between white and minority pupils. In particular, young Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, historically among the groups with the lowest educational outcomes, have now reached and in some cases exceeded the national average in GCSE secondary school exam results: while 15 years ago the negative gap for Bangladeshis was around 10 percentage points, today they are 5 points ahead of their white British peers (Parsons 2016; ONS 2023). Despite this progress, clear inequalities remain in the post-school phase: youth unemployment and poverty rates continue to be higher for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis (ONS 2023), and the so-called ethnic pay gap penalises their working careers, with Bangladeshis, for example, earning on average between 5 and 18% less than white Britons (ONS 2023) despite increased access to tertiary education, which now stands at over 60% for young Bangladeshis, compared to 40% of their white peers (Department for Education 2017, 2020). The UK has also devoted systematic attention to measuring integration processes. Through the technical document *Measuring Outcomes for Integrated Communities* (2019), the government has established key indicators such as language proficiency, ethnic mixing in neighbourhoods and schools, civic participation and volunteering, inter-ethnic trust, social mobility, citizenship acquisition and sense of local and national belonging (MHCLG 2019; Lalot et al. 2021). This continuous monitoring continues to be one of the distinctive features of the British system, with regular public audits tracking progress and identifying critical areas for action, even in a political context affected by instability. In summary, for more than a decade, the United Kingdom has pursued an integration model that combines anti-discrimination laws, national strategies for intercultural cohesion and targeted educational interventions. Bangladeshi communities have been among the main targets of these policies, achieving documented results in various areas, albeit accompanied by tensions and limitations that have already been discussed in previous chapters. Here, without going back into detail on the ideological assumptions, concrete effects or critical issues presented by these measures – already discussed in the first chapter – the aim is rather to provide an overview capable of highlighting how the issue of integration has been placed, at least formally, at the centre of a complex set of institutional

strategies, investments and monitoring mechanisms that mark a structural distance from the much more fragmented and weak framework observed in Italy.

6.1.1 London institutional instruments

London, for its part, is one of the most advanced, complex and structured urban contexts in Europe in terms of managing migration diversity (Scholten 2015; Phillimore et al. 2020). With around nine million inhabitants, it has long been a multicultural hub, where almost half of the population is now composed of ethnic minorities and over 300 languages are spoken (london.gov.uk). As a city-region with a devolved system of governance, London has progressively expanded its powers in the field of social cohesion and integration, placing these policies at the heart of its urban agenda. The historical and quantitative scale of migration to the British capital has allowed for the establishment of multi-level governance based on a combination of anti-discrimination legislation, dedicated institutional instruments and mature administrative practices. Since the 1990s, this configuration has enabled the early and systematic involvement of migrant communities in representative processes, allowing them direct access to mechanisms of political representation which, in the Italian context, remain severely limited to this day. Since 2016, with the election of Sadiq Khan as mayor – the capital's first Muslim mayor and the son of Pakistani migrants – the municipal administration has inaugurated a political cycle that, in its stated intentions, has made social inclusion one of its most visible priorities. It was under Khan's mandate that the position of Deputy Mayor for Social Integration was established for the first time, responsible for directing integration policies at the city level. This role was accompanied by a *Social Integration Team*, set up within the Greater London Authority (GLA), which is now the central operational structure for the coordination and implementation of inclusion measures. The creation of these bodies seems to represent, at least on paper, a choice to permanently integrate social inclusion into the core responsibilities of the municipal administration, alongside the traditional ones of urban planning, mobility and security (Greater London Authority 2020; Touihri-Mebarek 2022). In 2018, the municipality adopted the *All of Us – The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration* strategy, defining a model of social integration based on three pillars: the development of meaningful relationships between individuals from different backgrounds; the promotion of civic participation and democratic inclusion; and the structural reduction of inequalities and socio-economic barriers (Greater London Authority 2018). These areas of intervention have inspired a set of integrated policies ranging from legal support for naturalisation processes to the promotion of daily interaction and inter-ethnic collaboration. An example

of this approach is the *Citizenship and Integration Initiative (CII)*, launched in 2017 as a partnership between the City Council and philanthropic foundations such as *Trust for London and Unbound Philanthropy* (unboundphilanthropy.org). Through this collaboration, civic inclusion programmes, legal assistance projects for migrants without regular status, educational initiatives and specific pathways dedicated to remedying the consequences of the Windrush scandal and Brexit have been funded (Thornton and Petie 2019; Slaven 2021).

Within this administrative infrastructure, the London system has also gradually refined its monitoring and evaluation tools. The *Social Integration Measurement Toolkit* allows for the systematic measurement of levels of social interaction and participation in different districts of the city, measuring variables such as the presence of inter-ethnic friendship networks or voter turnout in the most marginalised neighbourhoods (Greater London Authority 2021; Touihri-Mebarek 2022). The data collected provides a constant empirical basis that feeds into the public policy cycle, strengthening the adaptive capacity of municipal governance. In 2022, the Mayor's Office allocated over £1.1 million to strengthening legal advice services, launching the *Migrant Londoners Hub* – a multilingual portal dedicated to guiding new arrivals – and providing diverse forms of assistance to refugees and vulnerable migrant workers. These municipal resources are supplemented by national funds provided through the *London Strategic Migration Partnership*, to which the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has allocated approximately £917,000 per year, reflecting a multi-year and continuous flow of public funding that fuels the entire governance ecosystem (Touihri-Mebarek 2022; Darling 2024). In its multi-level structure, London's governance is divided into two tracks: on the one hand, the City Hall central government and, on the other, the local authorities of the individual boroughs. It is at the borough level – such as Tower Hamlets or Newham, which we encountered in the previous chapter – that many of the concrete social cohesion, education and housing programmes are implemented, albeit in coordination with the general guidelines and funds promoted by the GLA and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime. For the Bangladeshi diaspora, historically rooted mainly in eastern boroughs such as Tower Hamlets and Newham, this institutional architecture has translated into a number of opportunities. Targeted programmes have addressed specific issues, from promoting female employment to reducing overcrowding in areas with high Bengali populations and supporting British-Bangladeshi entrepreneurship, while on a symbolic level, the Bengali presence has gradually consolidated in the public space. However, a structural issue linked to residential patterns remains: the territorial concentration of the Bangladeshi population, which in some districts such as Tower Hamlets reaches 34.7% of residents (ONS 2023; Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024), has fuelled forms of spatial segregation in which significant

socio-economic inequalities and specific difficulties persist, affecting certain segments of the diaspora, such as Bangladeshi women who still face language and access to work barriers. Poverty remains high in many neighbourhoods with high concentrations of migrants, with Tower Hamlets continuing to rank among the boroughs with the highest material deprivation scores in the city (ONS 2023; Borough of Tower Hamlets 2024; trustforlondon.org.uk). For Tower Hamlets, where 8% of residents do not speak English well, the aforementioned *Integrated Communities Action Plan* opens up several specific channels for intervention. The borough is listed in the “Annex A priority areas” of the *Integrated Communities English Language Programme*, so that the Council and local NGOs can obtain dedicated funding and the new *Language Co-ordination Fund* for community ESOL courses designed primarily for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women with poor literacy skills, identified by the government as a priority target (Borough of Tower Hamlets 2013; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018). In addition to language, the *Plan* confirms national funding that Tower Hamlets can activate: the *Integrated Communities Innovation Fund* for projects on social mix, sport and the arts; the *Near Neighbours and Schools Linking* programmes to twin Bangladeshi-majority schools with schools in other neighbourhoods and run intercultural micro-projects; the measures of the *Hate Crime Action Plan* and the *Strengthening Faith Institutions* micro-grants to strengthen mosques and community centres as places of cohesion (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018). On the economic front, the *Plan* links Tower Hamlets to the *Race at Work Charter* and the trial of mandatory reporting on the ethnic pay gap, tools that aim to reduce female inactivity and the employment gap that significantly affects Bangladeshis in the borough. Finally, the remaining *Controlling Migration Fund* and the *Integration Area Programme* calls for proposals (to be replicated beyond the five pilots) offer resources to improve public spaces, combat abusive landlords and support South Asian community ambassadors, thus completing a package of policies that enables Tower Hamlets to intervene on language, work, education and urban space with targeted state funds and proven best practices.

In this perspective, although not immune to contradictions and limitations, the London system appears to be a context equipped with more solid tools, dedicated resources and a capacity for continuous intervention, far removed from the fragmentation and intermittency that still characterise the migration governance mechanisms observable in the Roman context today.

6.2 The Italian attitude

When compared with the British system, the Italian framework shows a profoundly different trajectory from the outset, marked by a chronic lack of a coherent national vision and an approach that has delegated much of the burden of integration to local actors and civil society. The governance of migration policies and integration pathways in Italy has been fragmented, perpetually oscillating between local attempts at innovation and a chronic difficulty in stabilising a long-term political plan. Rather than the result of a comprehensive strategy, the Italian system has taken shape over the years through a series of discontinuous interventions, entrusted from time to time to different administrative levels, supported by temporary funding and accompanied by equally weak regulatory and programmatic continuity (Zincone 2006; Campomori and Caponio 2016; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Solano and Ponzio 2022).

The main regulatory reference remains the Consolidated Law on Immigration of 1998 (Legislative Decree 286/1998), which has been updated and amended numerous times over the years. However, in its basic structure, the Consolidated Law remains anchored to a predominantly administrative and security-oriented approach, aimed more at regulating the access and stay of foreign citizens than at defining positive and structured policies for social and civil integration. This initial framework was supplemented in 2012 by the *Integration Agreement (Accordo di Integrazione)*, which was intended to be a support tool for new arrivals, but which in practice has often resulted in additional bureaucracy, imposing training obligations – compulsory Italian language and civic culture courses, assessment tests – without these requirements being matched by concrete and effective support for civic, political and social participation (Locchi 2012; Zorzella 2012). In fact, integration in Italy continues to be an individualized obstacle race, in which success depends more on the resilience of individuals and the informal assistance of associations networks than on real institutional support. The structural limitation of the Italian system emerges even more clearly when we look at the numerous failed reforms that, over the years, have repeatedly attempted to carve out a space for political recognition for long-term residing migrants. Proposals such as administrative voting rights for foreigners, or the so-called *ius culturae*, consistently supported by large sections of civil society, academia and institutions such as the National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL), have systematically failed in the face of persistent political inertia and cross-party resistance in parliament. This lack of long-term vision is clearly reflected in the financial and organisational architecture that underpins Italian integration mechanisms (Bettinelli 2005; Tintori 2018; Toivanen et al. 2023). Rather than regular allocations and structured budget lines, most interventions continue to rely on temporary funding linked to European or ministerial calls for proposals, experimental projects or co-designs developed together with NGOs and the third sector.

This is an extremely fragile system, where the instability of available resources translates into an equally precarious continuity of services. The end result is a system exposed to the fluctuations of contingent politics, unable to consolidate a stable infrastructure capable of guaranteeing continuous paths of integration and civic empowerment. In this context, the burden of daily integration has fallen mainly on associations, secular and religious volunteers and forms of widespread mutual aid, which, however vital, cannot permanently replace the responsibilities that should be borne by the public administration.

Particularly significant in this context are developments in asylum and refugee reception policies, which have alternated between periods of openness and restriction over the last decade. From 2014 to 2018, under pressure from the increase in arrivals by sea, the *Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees* network (SPRAR) was gradually strengthened. This decentralised and integrated reception model, managed by municipalities, combined material hospitality with training and language courses, job support and social integration. Repeatedly cited as a good practice at European level, the SPRAR system was one of the few virtuous examples of multi-level governance of integration. However, this structure was radically changed with the approval of the 2018 Security Decree (Decree Law 113/2018), strongly supported by the then Minister Salvini, which reduced access to integrated reception to only those granted international protection and unaccompanied minors, excluding asylum seekers. Training and employment services were thus weakened and humanitarian protection, a tool that had enabled many vulnerable migrants to regularise their status, was abolished. Asylum seekers were placed in *Extraordinary Reception Centres* (CAS), which were often overcrowded and lacked real integration pathways. It was only in 2020, with the subsequent Conte II government, that a partial reversal of course was attempted, with a return to widespread reception through the *Reception and Integration System* (SAI) and the reintroduction of a form of special protection. These sharp fluctuations ultimately confirmed the Italian system's difficulty in stabilising a structural approach to the integration of asylum seekers and refugees over time, alternating between cycles of openness and restriction based on contingent political changes (Avallone 2021; Dimitradis 2023).

Within this unstable framework, schools have gradually established themselves as the main, and often sole, structural vehicle for social inclusion for second generations. As early as 2007, with the document *The Italian way to intercultural education*, the education system formalised an intercultural approach based on teaching Italian as a second language, the presence of cultural mediators and the promotion of cultural differences as an educational resource. This approach was consolidated with the 2014 *National Plan for Intercultural Education*, which is still the main reference point today. In the 2021/22 school year, foreign pupils or pupils of foreign

origin accounted for around 10% of enrolments (over 876,800 students), more than half of whom were born in Italy. It is often the school, despite limited resources, that provides concrete support for primary inclusion programmes that are lacking elsewhere, assisted in many areas by Bangladeshi associations themselves, which organise language courses and after-school programmes, sometimes in collaboration with local authorities (Lapov 2020; Chiappelli 2021; MIUR 2022).

In terms of combating discrimination, Italy has complied with European directives through Legislative Decree 215/2003 and Legislative Decree 216/2003, which transpose EU provisions against racial and religious discrimination in employment and services, respectively. The *National Office Against Racial Discrimination* (UNAR) operates in this area. Although it is active in promoting awareness campaigns and collecting complaints, it has significantly fewer resources and powers than similar bodies such as the British *Equal Opportunities Commission* (EHRC). Numerous incidents of hate speech and xenophobic attacks, including behaviour and statements by politicians, fail to receive a timely and effective response from the authorities. Legislative attempts to toughen penalties for neo-fascist propaganda or hate crimes have also been blocked in parliamentary debate, leaving this area partially uncovered (Lombardo and Del Giorgio 2013; IPOL 2020; ECRI 2024). Unlike the United Kingdom, the Italian system continues to lack a structured framework of official indicators that would enable the government to systematically monitor the state of integration. However, there are some periodic reports that provide indirect evidence for assessment. These include the Ministry of Labour's annual reports on foreigners in the Italian labour market and the reports on migrant communities in Italy, prepared in collaboration with other institutional bodies. These documents provide updated data on employment rates, entrepreneurship, residence permits, the presence of second generations and the acquisition of citizenship (Bijl and Verweij 2012; Collini 2022). Over time, several advisory bodies have also been established: the *Territorial Councils for Immigration* at the Prefectures (active since 1998), which bring together institutions, trade unions, employers' associations and immigrant representatives at the provincial level; and the *Municipal Councils* for Immigration, active in many cities including Rome, Milan, Turin, Bologna and Naples. However, even in this case, their operational effectiveness is often highly dependent on the political orientations of local administrations and subject to constant fluctuations in attention (Caponio 2005; Campomori and Caponio 2016; OECD 2019).

6.2.1 Rome's lack of planning

Rome, situated in a national context characterised by chronic slowness and institutional resistance, has ultimately emerged over the years as an ambivalent laboratory. While the capital has on several occasions attempted to introduce innovative tools for civic participation and consultation with migrant communities, these same mechanisms have struggled to find stability and operational continuity, fluctuating constantly with changing political sensibilities and administrative cycles. The experience of the *Adjunct Foreign Councillors*, introduced in 2004 with the aim of offering representation, albeit consultative and symbolic, to non-EU foreign citizens residing in Rome, should be viewed within this context. Four “additional” seats were provided for in the Campidoglio, divided by continent (Europe, Africa, Americas, Asia-Oceania) with a mandatory quota for women, plus one seat for each of the city’s municipalities. Essentially, these were figures without voting rights, but with the possibility of participating in the work of the Capitoline Assembly and the Municipal Councils, bringing the demands and needs of the various foreign communities to the attention of the institutions. The first round of elections resulted in the appointment of four additional councillors, one for each continent of origin, giving rise, for a few years, to an experiment that was unparalleled in Italy: a minimal but formalised institutional space for dialogue with new foreign residents. However, this experiment was interrupted in 2013, without new elections being called, despite the approval of updated regulations in 2014 (Pompeo 2013; OECD 2019). As a result, since then, non-EU citizens residing in Rome have been left without any form of stable institutional representation. Only recently, in 2022, has the issue returned to the political agenda thanks to a motion presented by Councillor Paolo Ciani, who relaunched the proposal to reinstate this instrument, emphasising both its practical value and the symbolic significance of including citizens who would otherwise be excluded in decision-making processes²².

In parallel with the experience of the *Adjunct Councillors*, Rome had already established the *Municipal Council for Immigration* (*Consulta Comunale per l’Immigrazione*) in the 1990s, an advisory body composed of representatives of migrant associations and members appointed by the administration. Although potentially relevant as a channel for structured dialogue between institutions and migrant civil society, the *Consulta* went

²² See https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/cs_01marzo2022_consiglieri_aggiunti_voto.pdf.

through numerous phases of stagnation and inactivity. An attempt to relaunch it was made in 2010, when it was placed under the responsibility of the Department of Social Policies, with the intention of strengthening its operational effectiveness. However, even in this case, the results were uneven, with its functioning largely dependent on the political agenda of successive municipal councils (Pompeo 2013; IDOS 2015; OECD 2019).

Over the course of almost two decades, the progressive political participation of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome has followed a dual path: on the one hand, their inclusion in consultative bodies established in the mid-2000s; on the other, the much more difficult and, to date, unsuccessful attempt to compete in the regular Municipal Council elections. A first important milestone was reached in 2006, when, thanks to the work of the *Dhuumcatu* association, Nure Alam Siddique – known as Bachcu – was elected Adjunct Councillor in Municipality V (then VI) with 273 votes, becoming the first Bangladeshi representative to sit in a Roman municipal institution. He was immediately followed by three other candidates from his country, Begum Hosne Ara, Md Taifur Rahman Shah and Md Lutfar Rahman Khan, who helped consolidate *Dhuumcatu*'s associative and political weight within the Torpignattara district, strengthening Siddique's profile as a stable interlocutor with municipal institutions. who was also actively involved in disputes related to housing rights and the fight against ethnic and religious discrimination²³.

It was only with the administrative reorganisation of 2013 that the first Bangladeshi candidate emerged in a fully competitive electoral contest. In the then new Municipality V, Shima Das ran for ninth place on the “*Rifondazione Comunisti Italiani – Sinistra per Roma*” list. Although she was not elected, her candidacy signalled the desire, especially on the part of the grassroots left, to capitalise on the political activism that had developed in the associations of the Prenestina-Casilina area. In the 2016 municipal elections, however, no Bangladeshi candidates appeared on the lists for Municipality V, while Md Abdul Wadud ran in Municipality I on the “*Democratici e Popolari + Roma Giachetti*” list, coming 24th out of 27 candidates. His name also appeared on the list for Municipality II, revealing a strategy that aimed more at increasing personal visibility than at achieving a real chance of election.

The 2021 elections saw the highest number of Bangladeshi candidates ever. With Roberto Gualtieri running for mayor and numerous progressive

²³ Reconstruction based on the archives of the portal <https://www.elezioni.comune.roma.it>.

micro-lists joining forces, Wadud reappeared as a candidate in Municipality III with the “*Gualtieri Sindaco*” list. At the same time, in Municipality V, Laila Shah, an activist and prominent member of the Torpignattara community, whom we will meet later, supported by “*Democrazia Solidale – DEMOS*”, obtained 39 votes, a result that represents, to date, the personal record for votes for a Bangladeshi candidate in the municipal area. For reasons of territorial balance, her name was also included on the lists for Municipality XII, marking the first time a Bangladeshi woman has been elected in a district outside the Prenestina-Casilina axis.

Laila Shah's political journey took a further step forward in 2023, when she ran for the Lazio Regional Council on the *DEMOS* list in support of Alessio D'Amato, marking the debut of a Bangladeshi representative in a regional election. Although the list did not pass the threshold, the candidacy assumed a clear symbolic value, signalling the gradual emergence of a diasporic leadership increasingly willing to engage with higher-level institutional arenas.

In territorial terms, Municipality V remains the hub of political mobilisation for the Bangladeshi community, thanks to its high concentration of residents, the presence of the main mutual aid associations and a twenty-year dialogue – often conflictual – with municipal institutions. The candidates presented in Municipality III, on the other hand, reflect the new residential shifts of the diaspora towards areas such as Montesacro and Talenti, while in Municipality I, their inclusion on the list appears more symbolic than actually competitive, given the low number of compatriots.

Looking ahead, the path of Bangladeshi political representation in Rome appears to be undergoing a slow but steady transition: from institutional representation “by concession”, as was the case with the *Adjunct Councillors* in 2006, to a gradual and repeated attempt to gain access to full representation through regular elections, although without yet managing to win any seats. The qualitative leap will likely require a consolidation of the associations that have developed over the years, the growing acquisition of citizenship capital, and the ability to forge effective political alliances capable of translating the numerical weight concentrated in the Eastern quadrants of the city into stable institutional representation. It is against this backdrop that Torpignattara assumes its particular role. Here, unlike elsewhere in the capital, the foreign presence has gradually gained visibility and social mobility, making it the only area of Rome where the numerical

and symbolic relationship between Italians and migrants is relatively more symmetrical.

Precisely for this reason, the following section delves into the voices of those who live and experience this transformation day after day in Torpignattara. The focus broadens beyond the Bangladeshi community to include the perceptions and stories of the Italian residents of the neighbourhood, in an attempt to understand how, within this urban space that has become symbolic, the contours of cohabitation, the boundaries of public visibility and the forms of collective appropriation of the city are defined today. Who is driving this process, how is it perceived, what tensions and expectations run through it: these are the questions that will accompany us on our journey through the daily trajectories of Torpignattara.

6.3 Dealing with politics from different perspectives

Having outlined the regulatory and institutional framework within which relations between Roman institutions and the migrant population have developed over the years, we can now take a closer look at the practical aspects of political representation through a testimony gathered during my fieldwork. While, on the one hand, regulations and administrative structures provide the formal framework for integration and participation policies, on the other hand, it is precisely through direct contact with some of the local protagonists that the ambivalences, limitations and actual potential of these mechanisms can be better understood. The voices of the institutional actors involved allow us to get to the heart of the daily mechanisms used to address the challenges of representing foreigners in the capital, especially in areas such as the Municipality V, where the migrant presence, and in particular the Bangladeshi presence, has long been significant both demographically and socially.

It was not easy to gain access to these interlocutors. After a rather long period in which I tried to establish useful institutional contacts within the Municipality of Rome in order to conduct some interviews, I finally managed to establish initial contact with the President of the *Social Policies and Health Commission* of the Capitoline Assembly. After an initial informal meeting, she put me in touch with the delegate for Social Policies, who at that time was closely following issues relating to inclusion and relations with foreign communities in the city. The conversation with the delegate represented a further step forward, allowing me to be directed to one of her

colleagues, who had gained extensive administrative experience in the area most relevant to my work: the Municipality V. In the past, this person had served as vice-president of that municipality, thus acquiring direct and in-depth knowledge of both the institutional dynamics and the concrete relationships established over the years with the various migrant communities in the area.

6.3.1 The Councillor

From the outset of our conversation, it is clear that my interlocutor is highly critical of the general framework of Italian policies on the management of foreign presence. His interpretation seems quite clear: the Italian system, he observes, shows a capacity for action that is almost exclusively focused on incoming flows, i.e. on the initial stages of arrival and on the control of access, while once people have settled stably in the territory, institutional attention tends to dissipate rapidly. In other words, there is a marked disproportion between the political and administrative energy invested in regulating borders and that employed in governing the now stabilised presence, with the result that entire sections of the migrant population find themselves in a sort of vacuum of public attention, where the difficulties of daily integration accumulate without finding structured responses.

Managing this whole issue of residency, housing suitability, and so on – that’s exactly where, obviously, the devil is in the details. Then there are the other issues, you know, the side effects, the things you have to take into account whenever you’re dealing with phenomena for which you don’t yet have up-to-date or adequate tools. You need to equip yourself, and to do that, you first have to really understand these phenomena. Some things are just physiological, while others are more chaotic or unstructured. And when it comes to the unstructured aspects, by now the evidence is clear, and in my view, we need to intervene a bit more decisively.

It is precisely the issue of residence and suitability of housing that represents a bureaucratic knot that often becomes, rather than a technical tool for administrative regulation, a real selective filter that can delay or prevent access to fundamental rights and services. “That’s where the devil lies”, he comments significantly, pointing out that behind the formality of the requirements lie material inequalities and mechanisms of exclusion that are difficult to overcome. And if this is true for situations where the system

should simply accompany regular presence, it becomes even more evident in cases he defines as “destructured”, where vulnerability is compounded by legal and socio-economic precariousness. In these situations, he stresses, we can no longer limit ourselves to ordinary management.

But it's clear the government has a strong capacity to steer and guide these processes. You have to anticipate them, you have to try to imagine what society will look like. As for governance, in my opinion... from my perspective, the way you reconstruct it, both at the institutional level and in participatory bodies, will determine what results you achieve. If we're able to adapt our model of governance and update our tools, then the effects of migration, both temporary and permanent, will be much easier to manage.

According to his analysis, what is lacking is a real update of governance tools, i.e. the ability of public institutions to equip themselves with adequate mechanisms to read and anticipate the demographic and social transformation underway. The risk he identifies is not so much that of a numerical crisis, as that of governance incapable of accompanying the increasingly pluralistic transformation of Italian society. It is therefore precisely in the ability to envision the future and design flexible and participatory institutions that, in his view, the true effectiveness of public policies towards migrants will be determined.

We can thus see, even from his words – which I cannot quote here in full, since he only allowed me to start recording after about an hour and a half of conversation – how visible the critical issues of Italian policies that we analysed earlier are: their structural discontinuity, the perhaps not accidental lack of a comprehensive, long-term vision, and a persistent difficulty, if not outright political reluctance, to recognise migration as a phenomenon that is now firmly embedded in the fabric of Italian society.

Addressing the nature and criteria of the *Council for Immigration*, his words reveal that – at least in his intentions, having worked on its reformulation – it was conceived not so much, as is often the case in Italy, as a body of empty symbolic representation but as a space which, despite the structural and political limitations of the system, attempted to move closer to a more incisive and, in some ways, almost equal to that of ordinary decision-making bodies. The councillor's words reflect, almost in exemplary form, some of the structural tensions that characterise the Italian approach to forms of political representation for foreign citizens. At the root of this is the structural absence of full political rights for those who do not have

citizenship, a void that institutional politics attempts to fill through second-level participatory mechanisms, such as the *Council*. But the very way in which the councillor describes the function attributed to this body highlights how its institutionalisation remains, at heart, a compensatory rather than a decisive strategy.

So, the Consulta, aside from its consultative functions... I set it up like this: the Consulta we established, besides being a consultative body, can also propose its own resolutions to the Metropolitan City Assembly. Then the conference of group leaders can take them, bring them to committee, amend them, or decide not to take them up at all. In this way, we give it a kind of, let's say, freedom to initiate proposals. And it's then the responsibility of the majority political forces to deal with it, to update the acts, to acknowledge that there's been a proposal from the foreign communities, to commit to discussing it, to study it. That's what we call the right of initiative.

The conferral of propositional and consultative powers to the *Consulta*, although presented as progress, remains bound by a logic of delegation and subordination: the initiative formally remains in the hands of the *Consulta*, but decision-making power continues to belong to the native political forces, the only ones that retain the ability to schedule, accept or reject proposals. In anthropological terms, what emerges is a dynamic of controlled incorporation, in which the inclusion of migrants in the public sphere takes place through institutional mechanisms strictly controlled by the dominant political authority. The *Consulta* thus becomes a space of authorised visibility rather than one of real political agency.

At the same time, the councillor's remarks reveal a still strongly functionalist view of the migrant presence: migrants are evoked as subjects with a right to participate in decision-making processes, not so much as bearers of autonomous political subjectivity, but rather as beneficiaries of urban services, commuters and users of infrastructure. Their political legitimacy is argued on the basis of their exposure to the material devices of city governance: they take public transport, are subject to urban planning, and experience the daily mobility of the city. But implicit in this scheme is the derivative nature of their freedom of expression: it does not stem from full recognition of citizenship, but from the fact that they are, pragmatically, subjects involved in the management devices of the metropolis.

And then, the Consulta can give its opinion and has the power to propose amendments, which can be accepted or rejected, on all the resolutions with a

strategic profile: the Social Master Plan, the General Master Plan, urban planning amendments, the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan, the Strategic Mobility Plan, the Strategic Asset Plan, the policy and programmatic document we update every three years. So what we're trying to do is move the Consulta beyond just being a token body for the immigrants, and instead make it a tool through which these citizens who can't elect representatives or vote can still have an impact on broader decisions. People here tell me «Why would immigrants care about the mobility plan?» But come on, they're the poor things who leave for work every morning, taking the trains...

Set against this backdrop, we can glimpse one of the distinctive features of migration governance in Italy, which we could define as a form of subordinate inclusion: migrants are not excluded from the political sphere, but their inclusion is always bound to mechanisms that position them as functional interlocutors rather than sovereign political actors. It is no coincidence that the councillor, in illustrating the contribution of migrants to the urban planning debate, uses the ironic image of the “poor things” who take the train every morning. This representation perfectly reflects the double discourse within which much of Italian local politics operates: a pragmatic recognition of the centrality of migrants in urban life, accompanied, however, by an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to translate this centrality into full political recognition.

Our reasoning then shifts to the approach being taken to develop the approval process for the new *Council for Foreigners*, where the somewhat experimental approach that institutions seem to be taking to the issue of political representation for migrants is particularly evident. They are openly drawing inspiration from existing models which, within the Italian context, represent more advanced exceptions to the norm, as in the case of the *Consulta* of Naples.

So, let me show you what happened: this innovation created some problems because we took the most advanced resolution, the one from Naples, probably the most advanced, and we basically loaded it in, word for word. Some people didn't like it, saying «This isn't really a consulta anymore», because honestly, it was a bit of a forced move. But I hope it goes through; and if it doesn't, there's still going to be a political issue, because it's time to give real representation. I'll send you the draft we filed at the office, and if they end up making any changes, I'll send you the final version too.

The interviewee's use of the term “forced move” is not accidental: it signals an awareness of attempting a structural change which, precisely

because it is not part of the usual pattern, inevitably generates resistance within political and administrative circles. What emerges from the interviewee's words is, once again, one of the structural elements that characterise the Italian context: the absence of coherent national leadership and the consequent proliferation of fragmented local interventions, largely left to the autonomous initiative of individual municipalities. Rome's adoption of the regulatory model developed in Naples is a paradigmatic example of this dynamic. In the absence of a unified framework and shared standards, each local administration finds itself reinventing its own instruments of representation and participation on a case-by-case basis, drawing where possible on experiences already tried elsewhere. But it is precisely this lack of systemic coordination that transforms the circulation of good practices into a potentially conflictual terrain. In this perspective, the reference to the possibility that “a political issue” may arise if the reform does not pass, is particularly significant.

Beyond the technical-administrative dimension, there is a deeper dynamic at play here, which refers to the underground competition between local authorities that, in the absence of a long-term state strategy, find themselves managing the processes of inclusion and participation of migrant communities in a disorderly manner. In an attempt to introduce more advanced institutional innovations, each administration inevitably ends up operating within a precarious balance, which can easily offend the sensibilities of other political and administrative levels, or raise questions about the real extendibility of certain solutions to other territorial contexts. To tell the truth, that draft was never sent to me. Although I was told that it would be sent to me at a later date, the document was never forwarded to me, and I have still not been able to see it. As a result, I have not been able to verify in detail what concrete changes had been proposed, nor to fully understand what he meant when he spoke of a “forced move” and the risk that, in this way, and with the new wording it “would no longer be a *Consulta*”. The only concrete reference on which I was able to base my reconstruction was therefore the regulations in force in Naples. Here, the *Municipal Council for Immigrants* was established in 2018, and although it does not have its own decision-making powers, it has the possibility to intervene on the main administrative acts affecting the lives of foreign residents, from social policies to regulations, urban planning and municipal tenders, formulating opinions and proposals that the City Council is required to consider in its decision-making process. Access to the *Consulta* is through

a periodic selection process, which admits associations and individuals who are permanently and documentedly involved in the area, with a two-year renewal period that allows the list of participants to be kept up to date with ongoing social changes. Each organisation appoints its own representative, while the assembly elects a chairperson from among its members to coordinate the work. Participation is entirely voluntary and free of charge, with no remuneration or financial compensation, thus maintaining a civic and non-professional profile of representation. I was therefore unable to understand the problem with this approach, nor was it explained to me.

The discussion quickly shifted to the role of the *Adjunct Councillor*, and here his judgement was openly critical. For him, the Councillors formula was one of the “many perverse formulas” that characterised Italy's attempt to build forms of institutional representation for migrant communities. Behind this assessment, once again, we see the difficulty of giving solidity and legitimacy to these mechanisms, which tend to easily fall prey to personalistic logic, clientelist networks or, as it is said here very directly, “meddling” and opportunistic practices that undermine their credibility and public function. In this sense, his account of a Peruvian representative active in his municipality, described as an ambiguous and somewhat opaque figure, “a fixer”, becomes almost an emblematic example of the distorted drift that, in his view, has often characterised such experiments in representation.

I saw it, the whole Adjunct Councillor situation. It's another one of those perverse formulas. One was a Peruvian guy in my district, he was kind of a fixer, always doing... a mess. I swear to you, I didn't understand a thing. He spoke Italian, and yet I couldn't understand a thing. I kept telling him «Can you translate for me what you're doing?». He was... a nice person, but honestly, also a smartass, always involved... doing... I mean, they made money off this, and it didn't work. Because it wasn't set up right, because it was badly thought out, because... I don't even really know how it worked.

However, what makes this reflection particularly interesting is the subsequent passage, in which the discussion shifts to a more general level, touching on the crucial issue of identity and multicultural policies. Drawing on the British experience and reflecting through the filter of Sarah Wagenknecht's theories, the councillor quite explicitly questions the risks associated with a model that, by encouraging the creation of recognised and funded ethnic representation, ends up reinforcing group identities rather than promoting processes of mixing and interaction. In this context, the criticism

goes far beyond the Roman case: what is being questioned is the entire logic of administrative multiculturalism, accused of producing counterintuitive effects with respect to its stated objectives. Instead of promoting inclusion and cohesion, institutionalised identity fragmentation would, according to this perspective, contribute to reinforcing rigid community divisions, fuelling distributive competition for access to public resources that risks degenerating into a sort of ethnic balancing of funding.

Basically, they were elected by the foreign community, and so on and so on. But then what happens? If in that territory the biggest foreign community is Bangladeshi, then it's the Bangladeshis who win. Since you're involved... I don't know if you know Sarah Wagenknecht, she's... Sarah Wagenknecht is a leader of the German Left, she left Die Linke and started this party they call "red-brown". Honestly, I really agree with her analysis. Maybe it's because you know, as you get older, you start to lose it, but there's an issue that the left just can't avoid. Because, for example, she rightly says: if we invest in identity, "identity politics", right? – which is more or less the kind of policies they do in England... So, for example, we fund associations representing that specific, you know, ethnicity, population, country... we're not actually helping the process, let's say, of building real integration, of mixing, and all that. If anything, we make this stuff even more rigid. We separate everyone. Like: a bit of money to the Romanians, a bit to the Bangladeshi, because there are a lot of them...

This observation, although expressed in a colloquial and somewhat provocative manner, recalls a model of diversity governance which, rather than working on the cross-cutting dynamics of social interaction, tends to reproduce cultural segmentation as a form of clientelist control (Kaya 2015; Saeys et al. 2019). His reasoning, moreover, suggests that this criticism is not merely the result of a general reflection on identity politics, but is also partly rooted in his own direct personal experience. He recounts, in no uncertain terms, that he himself was penalised in a municipal election precisely because of the Bangladeshi community's unanimous vote in favour of another candidate.

And then the Bangladeshis have... I ran in the primaries for the Municipio V, and I lost because the whole Bangladeshi community voted for the other guy, for example. He actually did really well, he finished third, after the candidate for president who then went on to win, and another guy. I came fourth, just two hundred votes behind. And, to be honest, I also lost because the membership numbers were inflated. Of course the Bangladeshis go to

vote, they need to, it makes sense... but there's a lot of clientelism. The representatives from the Bangladeshi community came to see me: in our area, about sixty percent voted for my opponent, forty percent for Caliste, who ended up winning.

As the interview progresses, some central tensions emerge that run through many of the unresolved dilemmas of Italian policies on the representation and participation of foreigners. On the one hand, his narrative seems to oscillate continuously between two registers: that of a sincere openness to the political recognition of migrants, and that of an equally deep suspicion of the opportunistic and clientelistic tendencies that, in his view, are likely to arise in the absence of clear rules and real institutional counterweights. If not properly regulated, the growth of community organisations can turn into an ambiguous space of opaque political intermediation, where identity-based aggregation risks bowing to logic of exchange-seeking that have nothing to do with effective democratic inclusion.

It's a mess over there, honestly. I'll say it again: I get it. If the whole process is done in good faith, with a spirit of solidarity, then it's fine for everyone. At the end of the day, who cares... If you're the Italian-Bangladeshi guy and you have to go sell potatoes, whatever—as long as you're there, selling potatoes... But not like this. Because then there's loads of money under the table, bribes, it's just a mess...

But alongside this critical dimension, there is also a deeper awareness of the systemic distortion produced by the legal asymmetry that characterises the position of migrants in Italian participatory arenas. At a time when the only space truly accessible to many foreigners is that of internal party primaries, he highlights - perhaps without fully explaining it - the structural contradiction of a system which, by denying the right to vote in local elections, pushes foreign communities to concentrate their bargaining power on those informal and less regulated segments of the political-party circuit. This creates a paradoxical situation in which, although not recognised as voters in the general institutional sphere, these citizens nevertheless acquire selective power within parties, which can then be negotiated as a residual form of indirect representation.

So... and there's been this big mismatch: the fact that you give these citizens the chance to vote in the primaries... And clearly, they understand

that, if there's nothing else, even the primaries can become a place where they can use their weight. Because later, whoever gets elected will have to answer to them, at least a bit. That's the moment, maybe only in that way they can make themselves count, and so they take part. But then, poor things... you don't let them vote in the real local elections. And so you end up creating this total asymmetry, about as undemocratic as it gets. And it's not even something you really perceive as political.

The narrative also clearly reveals the risk, ever-present in such contexts, that recognition of the electoral strength of the Bangladeshi community will be treated more as a bargaining chip than as a genuine enhancement of autonomous and representative political leadership. His proposal to give a council seat to the candidate who won hundreds of votes from Bangladeshis, which fell on deaf ears, shows once again how a negotiations logic often takes precedence in Rome over any comprehensive, long-term vision of migrant participation.

But for example, Mauro, the president, just the other day told me «Come to work with me». Maybe I could've tried to make him [the other candidate] an assessor. He got 800-900 votes from the Bangladeshi community, I think. At the very least, you should delegate, give him a role, make him responsible, give him real representation. That's how it should be.

The account thus contains an implicit but powerful accusation: ultimately, no one, neither in political parties nor in institutions, is really interested in building solid instruments of representation for foreigners. Before the primaries, electoral courtship dynamics are activated, and efforts are made to gather support among the largest communities, such as the Bangladeshi community. Then, once the campaign cycle is over, everything falls silent. In the absence of a system that provides stable and recognised spaces for representation, forms of involvement remain contingent, subject to the discretion of the majority and the possibility of symbolic “co-optation” with no concrete outcomes.

It all acquires a mass-media dimension, you know... It's clear that it becomes a political issue, right? So even if those people don't get any benefit themselves, they still help me [politician] to build a profile. [...] but the paradox is that this whole thing means we, and the political class in general, end up dealing with these issues in a superficial way, because we only see it through the lens of «am I gaining support or not?». It becomes about reaching a higher level of visibility on social media, in the newspapers, on news

channels. The real problem is that politics needs to keep making an ongoing effort to update itself, because society is changing, because people from other cultures are coming in.

Thus, even where the electoral weight of diasporas is clearly evident, it does not translate into a real redistribution of decision-making power, reiterating the gap between formal recognition and substantive access that constitutes one of the crucial issues of political integration in Italy. In his subsequent remarks, the ambivalence that characterises much of the local political discourse on the migrant presence re-emerges. On the one hand, his words reveal a sincere, albeit often naive, attempt to question how to adapt tools and institutions to growing social diversification. The proposals, such as the idea of developing a mobile application to overcome language barriers, or integrating sports originating in migrants' countries of origin into municipal sports programmes, are not without a certain practical logic. However, they also reveal a deeply structural inability to go beyond superficial solutions that circumvent – without really addressing – the much more complex issue of the institutional production of inequality of access.

I repeat: I think we really need a deep reflection on what kind of tools we're using—even the so-called simplest ones. Like, really, even an app... all these people have a smartphone. You could make an app to help them, couldn't you? I had a guy at the desk, at the URP... I used to work with Russian workers who were... incredibly hard-working. They were telling me... you know what they did? They downloaded Translate, the app. Someone would come in, say, a Kurd... «you need to do this, this, this, this...» and then boom! Off they'd go. It worked. But for God's sake... something like that... is it possible that this poor woman has to use her own mobile credit to do that? Is it possible that the public administration can't even provide that? Because the fact is, nobody's even came up with it yet.

The idea of compensating for gaps in governance through digital expedients or ad hoc adjustments to sports offerings, while motivated by a proactive spirit, reveals the limitations of a perspective that continues to treat pluralism as a management challenge rather than a transformative horizon for public action. Once again, the risk that emerges from this approach is that of producing functional micro-solutions, designed to temporarily contain certain emerging pressures, without however translating into an effective rethinking of how urban diversity is governed.

Same goes for sport. With the councillor, I suggested we should promote, for example, work scholarships in sports. Because we don't know anything about cricket. But I said let's create job grants for sports instructors in the disciplines that these people actually come from. Cricket isn't a sport with any tradition here. So it makes sense to get an instructor who's been, say, in Bangladesh for fifteen years, where these sports are popular. Same with, what's it called, field hockey... or other sports... even though that one, of course, was originally brought in by the English, and then the Bangladeshis made it their own... But anyway, they need real training. Why, in those cases, does the sports instructor have to be Italian? And why, in our programme, don't we include these new sports?

Emblematic, in this sense, is also his reflection on the issue of the veil and migrant women's access to sports. The core issue he identifies, albeit in its elementary and problematic form, touches on one of the major absences in the local political debate: the relationship between agency, cultural constraints within communities and public responsibility in creating inclusive spaces.

And why don't we also think about women who want to play sport? Maybe we could start to create the conditions for them to do sport within their own culture, which... let's be honest, we all live with the doubt: is the burka a free choice, or is it something imposed? But while we're waiting to sort that out, shouldn't they at least have the right for their... it's not just about going to the pool or doing gymnastics. Because I think now is the time. This is what it means to update our tools, to update our institutions. If we don't do this...

Yet, as his own words suggest, these are issues that do not even seem to feature systematically on the institutional political agenda in Rome, remaining confined to occasional considerations or individual insights, incapable of translating into comprehensive policies for action. What emerges, in the end, is the portrait of a local political system that continues to move within a fragile and provisional balance, where the issue of migrant representation remains unaddressed, handled more as a tactical variable than as a structural issue to be managed with a genuine strategic vision. His narrative, for all its ambiguities and oscillations, makes it clear how the political inclusion of migrant communities still unfolds in a space lacking real long-term design, left instead to contingent, temporary solutions that rarely translate into stable and meaningful forms of recognition.

It is within this still unsettled space that, as we now turn to examine, the Bangladeshi community of Torpignattara has, over time, attempted – not without its own internal tensions and contradictions – to carve out some form of autonomous political agency. A process that does not follow linear or consolidated paths, but one which nevertheless offers a valuable lens through which to observe how, even within an institutional context ill-equipped to accommodate it, dynamics of self-organization and attempts at political interlocution still manage to take shape and demand attention.

6.4 Bangladeshi political associationalism in Rome

Since its early stages in the 1990s, the associational landscape of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy, and thus also in Rome, has been marked by a surprising vitality, managing for a long time to maintain a high level of mobilization and public visibility (King e Knights 1994; Morad e Della Puppa 2018). These were not simply spaces for internal community support, but structures that actively sought to establish themselves as interlocutors with institutions, claiming rights and recognition in a public sphere that, until then, had offered little to no room for migrant representation. Yet, what began as a fairly cohesive network gradually fragmented over time. Alongside the more historic and politically rooted organizations, a wide array of groups began to emerge: small educational initiatives, neighbourhood committees, mutual aid networks responding to immediate needs, as well as numerous ephemeral organizations that often existed more on paper than in practice, often fragmented along the lines of town, villages or districts of origin (Priori 2012; Morad e Della Puppa 2018). The reasons behind this proliferation, as studies such as those by King e Knights (1994), Knights (1996) e Priori (2010, 2012, 2017), have been multiple. In several cases, associations first emerged as informal mechanisms to offer basic forms of protection to newcomers, assisting with immediate challenges such as securing housing, accessing employment, or navigating complex bureaucratic procedures. In others, they sought to fill the gaps left by public institutions, particularly in the educational sphere, where the needs of migrant children often went unmet. Still others developed as spaces for legal assistance, especially in support of regularization processes, or as responses to episodes of discrimination and urban vulnerability (Knights 1996; Fioretti 2011; Priori 2012). Comparable trajectories can be observed in the London context, although marked by crucial structural divergences. There, the particular legal

status historically granted to Commonwealth migrants, combined with a far more robust and systematic intervention by public authorities, both in the form of targeted funding and broader territorial empowerment programs, created the conditions for many organizations to stabilize over time, gradually transforming into consolidated nodes of diasporic social capital. Yet, this same institutional embrace also produced certain unintended effects: by formally codifying and financing group identities, it risked reifying the very notion of “community,” turning it into an administrative instrument while, at the same time, opening new spaces for political competition, negotiation, and resource struggle (Eade 1990, 1991; Eade et al. 2002; Eade e Garbin 2006; Priori 2012). In the Italian case, and particularly in Rome, this kind of state-mediated framework has largely been absent. What took shape instead was a far more fragmented and contingent field of associational practices, developing with little external scaffolding and often subject to abrupt cycles of emergence and decline (Priori 2012; Morad e Della Puppa 2018). Many organizations proved short-lived, while others succeeded in consolidating modest local hegemonies, where community support blended with economic interests and, at times, with ambitions for political brokerage. In the absence of any kind of institutional recognition or funding mechanisms, these forms of micro-hegemony often became concentrated around a handful of highly visible leaders, who managed to position themselves as interlocutors with public institutions, but who were not always perceived from below as disinterested or universally representative figures. This internal ambivalence remains one of the defining features of the Bangladeshi associational field. On the one hand, these organizations often serve as genuine lifelines for newcomers, offering concrete support in moments of need. On the other hand, there exists a widespread skepticism, circulating within the migrant community itself, that some associations function primarily as platforms for personal advancement and resource accumulation, rather than collective solidarity.

It is against this backdrop that we now turn to the figure who, more than any other, has come to embody a certain visibility of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome, both within the community and in the eyes of the local institutions. Nure Alam Siddique, widely known as Bachcu, whom we have already encountered in previous sections, notably for his role as the first Bangladeshi adjunct foreign councillor of what was then the Municipio VI, occupies a position that remains in many ways emblematic of the ambivalences that run through this entire field.

Among the different figures that have progressively emerged within the Bangladeshi associational field in Rome, few occupy a position as prominent and enduring as that of Bachcu. His trajectory offers one of the clearest examples of how community leadership can take shape in contexts where formal institutional frameworks remain weak and fragmented. The association he leads, Dhumcatu – whose name, meaning “comet” in Bengali, already conveys something of its self-representational narrative – was formally established in 2003, following his election as adjunct councillor. That victory marked his personal rise but also the marginalization of the older Bangladesh Association in Italy, with Dhumcatu gradually assuming a central role as the primary organizational vehicle for Bachcu’s leadership. Unlike earlier phases of Bangladeshi diaspora politics, which had been heavily shaped by transnational party affiliations, Bachcu’s leadership has increasingly detached itself from these partisan logics, building instead a form of locally negotiated authority rooted in direct relationships with Italian institutions (Priori 2012). His association today brings together roughly 8,000 members, and its activities range from the provision of administrative and legal assistance to newly arrived migrants, to the organization of intercultural events, field research projects, and advocacy campaigns aimed at securing political and social rights for foreign residents. Since 2007, the association has also been among the founding promoters of the Comitato Immigrati, a platform bringing together multiple associations of various national backgrounds, alongside grassroots leftist movements and segments of the trade unionist base. This strategy of constant mobilization has become one of Bachcu’s principal instruments for maintaining both institutional visibility and political leverage.

Within this framework, Bachcu has come to be routinely presented – both by his supporters and often by institutional actors – as the spokesperson, the “president” of the Bangladeshi community in Rome. His highly visible public profile, which includes a substantial following on social media, has further consolidated his centrality in mediating between migrant constituencies and local authorities. Throughout this trajectory, a defining element of Bachcu’s strategy has been the rhetorical construction of the Bangladeshi community itself as a coherent and unified collective actor, a discursive move that, while simplifying the internal heterogeneity of the diaspora, has allowed both himself and Dhumcatu to be widely recognized, often without much contestation, as the legitimate voice of the entire community. His is thus a form of leadership that skilfully combines the

provision of tangible services to migrants with the management of political visibility, institutional access, and symbolic capital.

6.4.1 Bachcu

By the time I managed to organize an interview with Bachcu, our paths had already crossed on numerous occasions over the years. His name, face, and voice had become familiar presences throughout my fieldwork, whether during local events, public rallies, or informal conversations that punctuate the everyday life of Torpignattara. Our organised meeting took place under rather emblematic circumstances, following the celebrations of the Bangladeshi New Year in 2023, for which Bachcu himself had organized his own festival, staged within a large, semi-abandoned green area on the margins of Torpignattara. That space, as I gradually came to reconstruct through fragments of conversations and informal accounts gathered over time, had long been on Bachcu's radar as a potential site for his associative and political activities. In the previous years, he had discussed with the strongest candidate who was running for the presidency of the local municipality – the same person who, as we have seen in the account given by the municipal councillor, eventually won the election – and the two had reached an informal agreement: if the Bangladeshi community supported his bid in the primaries, the candidate had promised that, once elected, he would officially hand over the management of the area to Bachcu. Yet, as often happens within the shifting logics of local clientelism, these pre-electoral promises proved fragile. When the Bangladeshi electorate ultimately turned its support towards the rival candidate (the one previously mentioned to me by the city councillor as the one who got nearly 800 votes from Bangladeshi voters), the new municipal leadership quietly withdrew the earlier commitment. The dynamic described by my earlier interlocutor thus found here a very tangible expression, once again revealing the fragile and transactional nature of political bargaining around migrant representation in Rome's peripheral districts.

Faced with the withdrawal of institutional support, Bachcu responded in a way that was at once defiant and characteristic of the grassroots pragmatism that often marks this type of localized political agency. Rather than relinquishing the site, he moved to occupy it directly: fixed gazebos were installed, a small urban garden was established, and the space quickly became a gathering point for both festive celebrations and informal political

meetings. Only a few days before our interview, I had personally witnessed the arrival of the municipal police, who proceeded to disperse the crowd gathered for the New Year's festivities and to seal off the structures Bachcu's association had erected.



Figure 20 The park occupied by Bachcu in 2023 after the seizure, personal photo



Following the police intervention, however, Bachcu did not abandon the initiative. Instead, he simply relocated the celebration a few hundred meters away, avoiding the use of the stage and gazebos that had been sealed off. For over a year, he continued to make use of those surrounding spaces, organizing gatherings and meetings that maintained both the visibility and momentum of his activities. On several occasions, I myself attended meetings he convened there, often in the presence of activists from various radical and anarchist political groups, with whom Bachcu was actively coordinating strategies for his ongoing political campaign in defense of immigrant rights in Italy.



Figure 21 Bangladeshi New Year celebrations organised by Bachcu in the occupied park

Back in the late 1990s, Bachcu, together with two other prominent community figures, Kibria and Rahman, had been at the centre of much larger, more structured and highly visible celebrations, regularly staged in public parks such as Parco di Centocelle or Villa Gordiani, with the formal authorization of the local authorities. These events, at the time, stood as some of the most public expressions of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome, drawing wide participation and granting the organizers a considerable degree of recognition. Yet, over time, this dynamic began to change. A series of hostile episodes, including some racist attacks, brought insecurity into these large gatherings. But it was mainly the growing personal rivalries between the three that gradually altered the very structure of these celebrations. Over time, this mutual competition made it increasingly difficult for any single organizer to recreate the level of coordination and stability that had once defined their joint efforts, and as they stopped organising events together, none of them was any longer able to independently secure the necessary financial backing to sustain events of that earlier scale. What has emerged instead is a much more fragmented and improvised landscape, with festivals now taking place through ad hoc arrangements, often shifting from one public space to another within the neighbourhood.

Our conversation opened with a brief discussion on the events at the park, which, despite the municipal seals, had remained at the centre of his recent activities, and then moved on to racist attacks that over time affected the Bangladeshis in the neighbourhood. The Bangladeshi community in Torpignattara has, over time, suffered a sequence of attacks, episodes of violence and hostile incursions, reflecting not only the fragility of migrant presence in Rome's peripheries, but also the unresolved tensions inscribed within the social and political fabric of the neighbourhood. Already in the early 2000s, Bengali-run shops were repeatedly targeted with acts of vandalism and aggression, often the result of a mix of racial hostility and everyday neighbourhood frictions. The pattern would soon become more organized and visible. In May 2009, one of the earliest major incidents unfolded in Villa Gordiani park, as members of the Bengali community were preparing to celebrate the New Year. That night, about twenty local youths launched a coordinated racist attack, verbally assaulting the group before violently beating them with sticks and smashing their vans. Several people were hospitalized. The attack triggered immediate protests and appeals from

community leaders demanding greater protection, though these calls would remain largely unanswered. In March 2010, another episode occurred when a group of Bangladeshi youths were first harassed with eggs and later physically assaulted by ten Italian men, one reportedly armed. Isolated incidents of street violence, often dismissed in public discourse as neighbourhood altercations, continued to multiply in the years that followed. In March 2011, five minors were arrested for assaulting an Italian man who had refused them a cigarette. The following month, two additional teenagers were detained for a similar attack. The growing climate of hostility increasingly targeted not only Bangladeshi individuals but also their businesses, which were regularly subjected to bullying and intimidation. By January 2012, violence escalated again when two young Bangladeshi men were stabbed during a robbery attempt, while another was beaten nearby. The community organized a public protest that same week, demanding security and denouncing the repeated failure of local institutions to provide protection. Yet the escalation would continue. In May 2013, another brutal beating occurred when a Bangladeshi man was attacked late at night while walking home along Via di Tor Pignattara. Approached by two youths asking for a light, he was instead violently assaulted. The attackers, later found in the neighbourhood, were still wearing blood-stained clothing when apprehended.

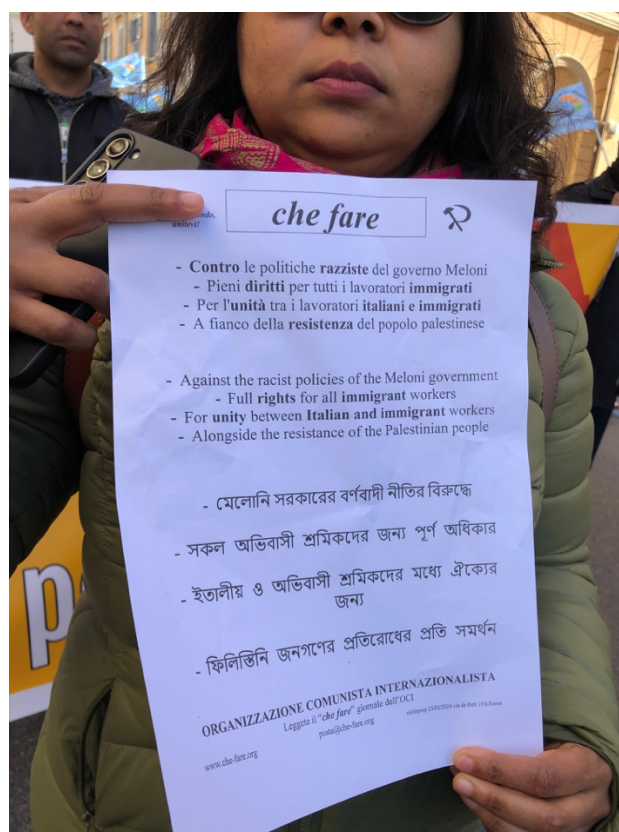
Amid this series of growing aggressions, two distinct trajectories of violence began to crystallize. On one side, what would become known as the Bangla Tour started to emerge: organized raids targeting Bangladeshi residents, orchestrated by extreme-right youth networks often linked to the historic neo-fascist strongholds around the Acca Larentia section. As court documents would later reveal, these attacks functioned partly as initiation rites within xenophobic subcultures, where young members of the far right were socialized through ritualized, violent performances that deliberately sought out Bangladeshis as victims, perceived as unlikely to retaliate or file complaints. On the other side, in September 2014, the murder of Muhammad Shahzad Khan unfolded under very different, though equally disturbing, circumstances. Shahzad, a young Pakistani man, was killed on Via Pavoni by a teenage resident incited by his own father. The victim had been walking through the neighbourhood while reciting Qur'anic verses aloud, a practice that some residents found unsettling. When the father saw him passing by, he reportedly threw water from his balcony and then urged his son to physically assault the man. The teenager obeyed, attacking Shahzad with

fatal force while neighbours watched from their windows. Although early media accounts framed the incident as a neighbourhood dispute or an unfortunate overreaction to provocation, the ensuing investigation painted a much darker picture. The autopsy revealed multiple blows to the head, while witnesses testified to the father's incitement. Both father and son were later convicted for their roles in the killing.

Throughout these years, as the Bengali and broader South Asian community continued to grow, their increasing visibility often became itself a target simultaneously perceived as an unsettling presence by certain segments of local residents, and as an easy scapegoat by far-right actors eager to translate social anxiety into organized racial aggression. For the institutions, meanwhile, the neighbourhood's recurring episodes of violence remained too often framed through generic narratives of urban disorder, bypassing any serious confrontation with the deeper patterns of exclusion, racialization, and territorial competition playing out beneath the surface. In Bachcu's reading, much of the hostility directed toward the Bangladeshi community in Rome is ultimately inseparable from its very capacity for self-organization. The visibility the community has acquired through political mobilizations, rights-based demonstrations, electoral participation and public religious and cultural celebrations has, in his view, made it a target precisely because it refuses to remain silent or invisible. Rather than fragmenting under the pressure of these attacks, he insists, the community continues to respond with collective presence and political engagement. The public festivals he organizes are, in this sense, not much as spaces of cultural performance, but deliberate acts of pushing towards integration and mutual recognition. Festivals are thus occasions to present the traditions of Bangladesh to the Italian public while simultaneously asserting the community's belonging to the city.



Figure 22 Anti-racist demonstration organised by Bachcu in a network with other migrant associations and the Internationalist Communists group. In the background MP Aboubakar Soumahoro. Personal photo taken in February 2024



For Bachcu, integration must operate as a two-way process, one in which both guest and host take the time to understand each other's everyday life, however minor or intimate such details may seem. Yet Bachcu's account moved elsewhere. In the very days preceding our meeting, he had taken part in a demonstration at Piazza Vittorio, in support of Alfredo Cospito, the

anarchist activist held under the 41-bis regime, a level of incarceration typically reserved for mafia leaders. What emerged from his narrative was not so much a detour from his core political engagements, but rather another piece of the eclectic and fluid repertoire through which he continuously repositions himself across multiple, sometimes unexpected, political arenas

Saturday was a good day. Besides the celebration, there was also a protest against that method of “silent action”... I went to the square, joined the march against Article 41-bis; I wanted to go back to the park afterwards, but I couldn't, because they blocked me. They stopped me, they knew where the group was heading. They blocked me on Via Prenestina. At the demonstration, I spoke and said that 41-bis is inhumane: a person is already in prison, and then they add solitary confinement, put you in a cage—this is torture. Even in our country, even towards those they call «Muslim terrorists», nothing like this exists: no judge ever orders total isolation. Back home, if a prisoner causes trouble, the director punishes them for ten days, a week; then that's it. I also pointed out that, in Piazza Vittorio, immigrant shopkeepers had pulled down their shutters because there were rumours the demonstration was being organised by a group against immigrants. It's absurd.

His involvement in the protest, and even his own intervention as one of the speakers, revealed once more the extent to which his activism moves well beyond the immediate concerns of the Bangladeshi diaspora. Rather, what takes shape is a broader political grammar in which struggles for migrant rights, critiques of state repression, and alliances with segments of the Italian radical left appear less as isolated commitments than as interconnected terrains of political opportunity and visibility. The protest against 41-bis, framed by him explicitly as a violation of human dignity, even drawing comparisons with repressive practices in his country of origin, highlights the way in which his discursive positioning often oscillates between moral denunciation and transnational reference points, implicitly unsettling Italy's self-perception as a legal and democratic space of inclusion. His intervention, he explained, was not simply an act of solidarity with the anarchist movement, but also an opportunity to voice a set of broader concerns that, in his eyes, directly implicate the position of immigrants in Italy. He had asked to speak during the demonstration, using the platform to denounce what he perceives as a growing hostility in Italian public discourse, where even sectors that traditionally present themselves as progressive now allow anti-immigrant sentiments to circulate openly

No one invited me to speak, I asked to take the floor myself. They know me: I announced that I wanted to say something. I also went there to denounce the fact that among migrants there's this rumour going around, that in Italy people are marching in the streets against immigrants! What the hell is that? You just can't accept it. And besides, Alfredo isn't a mafioso, he's an idealist. Crime should be punished, I agree. But there's a difference: someone who robs a bank, that's one thing; but someone who's starving and takes five euros' worth of food... cheese, mozzarella, from the supermarket, you'd charge people for that? Come on! I've seen it so many times, especially at Christmas: parents stealing for their children. So that's what I'm saying: you have to make distinctions. I said that for the sake of security and your system, it's not right. It's for things like this that we need to create an open, intellectual society. Not everything should be labelled as crime, you know?

In Bachcu's remarks we glimpse a recurring tension at the intersection of migrant visibility, public morality, and political representation. Rather than engaging with the securitarian discourse on its own terms, he attempts to reframe the conversation around a distinction between structural deprivation and genuine criminal behaviour. What surfaces is not a defence of transgression but a demand for a more situated understanding of poverty-driven practices that, while technically illicit, belong to the informal coping strategies of marginalized groups. In this sense, Bachcu's narrative reflects an attempt to reclaim interpretive authority over how migrant lives are narrated and judged within the host society. It is a form of counter-narrative that resists both criminalization and the reductive innocence often ascribed to immigrant communities, asserting instead a political maturity capable of engaging with complexity.

As our conversation shifted toward the broader transnational dimensions of the Bangladeshi diaspora, London inevitably emerged as a constant point of comparison, both as an aspirational reference and as a reminder of structural distance. In Bachcu's reading, the divergence between Rome and London is neither incidental nor temporary, but rooted in long historical trajectories. London, shaped by over a century of South Asian migration, carries the unmistakable imprint of its colonial entanglements. What now exists is not simply a large presence, but a deeply entrenched one: successive generations of migrants have steadily consolidated economic and social footholds, transforming segments of the city into dense networks of family businesses, political organizations, and community institutions that operate as embedded social capital within the urban fabric itself

In London, you've got over a century of Asian immigration. It's like living in a former colony. The British took everything, they took away resources and knowledge, and now you have third and fourth generations of Bangladeshi immigrants. In Rome, we're only at the second generation. And then there's the fact that in London, the economic, social, and socio-economic presence is incredibly strong: it all depends on India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. I'd say over 15% of London's population is of Asian origin, and nearly 20% of the city's economy... restaurants, shops, taxis, and so on comes from Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis. These people send remittances back home, creating a kind of private welfare system.

This historical embeddedness is mirrored in the very administrative architecture that regulates diplomatic relations. The existence of the High Commission, rather than a traditional embassy, stands as a residual marker of the Commonwealth framework, a configuration that continues to structure the channels of political representation and transnational engagement for former colonies. In Bachcu's account, this institutional scaffolding allows Bangladeshi Londoners to sustain forms of political visibility and negotiation with public authorities that remain largely inaccessible to their counterparts in Italy

Former Commonwealth settlers have a different political relationship: in London, you don't have an "Embassy," you have a "High Commission." Saida is the Bangladeshi High Commissioner, not an Ambassador, because in the Commonwealth, that's what it's called. It's a different kind of politics.

By contrast, the position of the Bangladeshi presence in Rome appears significantly more precarious. Here, migration is framed as a younger, less stabilized process, still navigating the ambiguities of marginal entrepreneurship and limited institutional recognition. Small-scale businesses scattered across peripheral neighbourhoods mark the outer edge of an economic landscape that has yet to yield durable leverage or voice in the public sphere. Rome remains, in his words, a place where many still arrive only to move on, seeking, whenever possible, alternative destinations within the wider European landscape where more structured diasporic infrastructures are already in place

That's why, in London, you really feel a strong sense of belonging: people work, run restaurants and shops, send remittances to the Bangladeshi government. Here in Rome, we're marginal... just a few shops in the suburbs, a few small businesses. Over there, they feel integrated: they've got their own

network of associations, a High Commission to represent them, a real sense of community.

In contexts like Italy or France, national feelings of attachment often resurface in everyday forms, even spilling into friendly rivalries during events like international football tournaments. Nonetheless, London operates under a different logic: the longer history of settlement and the embeddedness within the Commonwealth framework have allowed for the emergence of a broader collective identity, one that tends to absorb internal divisions into a more cohesive sense of belonging. There, the enduring framework of the Commonwealth allows for a more encompassing sense of collective belonging, one that partially dissolves national rivalries into a broader postcolonial identification

Many people arrive in Italy and then move on to other European countries. Bangladeshis in France argue with those in Italy about the World Cup... these internal national rivalries, where everyone says «my national team is better». In England, though, even if each person supports Bangladesh or Pakistan or India, there's still this sense of being part of the Commonwealth.

As our conversation continued, we moved toward the contrasting everyday conditions faced by migrants in Italy and the UK, the structural divergence between the two models of incorporation became increasingly visible. In Bachcu's account, the difference is not solely of perception, but also of material arrangements that shape the architecture of migrant family life. In the UK, where South Asian migration has long been woven into the fabric of society, institutional infrastructures, though far from perfect, offer channels that enable a degree of stability. State-provided housing allowances, child benefits, free education and healthcare, and even the relatively accessible opportunities for women to contribute to household income through part-time or informal work, together construct a platform upon which migrant families can begin to stabilize their trajectories. These mechanisms, while not erasing class inequality, create spaces in which the strains of everyday reproduction become manageable

In England, if you have a family, it's easy to find work even for your wife: just two hours in a shop, in the afternoon or evening, and you make ten pounds, say. That extra income really helps with bills and expenses: if you have three or four children, the benefits system – housing benefit, child benefit – covers eighty percent of your rent and you get £180 per child;

everything else, like school and healthcare, is basically free. Here in Italy, instead, with a salary of €1,200 you're paying €700 just for rent and you're left with almost nothing; your wife can't even find a casual job.

In Italy, by contrast, the absence of such institutional scaffolding exposes migrant families to far more precarious negotiations of survival. The cost of living, especially housing, absorbs disproportionate shares of modest incomes, leaving little room for economic or social mobility. Women, in particular, face sharp obstacles to labour market entry, further concentrating financial pressure on single earners within the household. The consequence, as Bachcu underlines, is not only material deprivation, but also its effects on family cohesion, children's wellbeing, and their capacity to integrate into peer networks. Spatial overcrowding, the absence of private spaces for children, and the symbolic marginalization these conditions generate in schools and neighbourhoods produce subtle, accumulative forms of exclusion, felt most sharply by the younger generation

In Italy, housing remains a major issue: if you can't pay the rent on your own, you end up in a small two-room flat together with two other families; the children grow up without their own room, without any privacy. At school, they notice the difference immediately: their classmates go to their aunt's or grandma's house, they have cake, they have parties, but these kids don't even have a place to play. When poverty knocks at the door, love goes out the window.

This contrast, however, is not simply a reflection of different policy choices; it exposes divergent histories of colonial entanglement and their afterlives. Commonwealth citizenship structures, for example, have historically allowed many South Asians to access British citizenship by birthright, a pathway absent in the Italian context, where *ius sanguinis* regimes continue to delay full civic inclusion for second-generation migrants

There's this idea that Italy is a paradise, but as soon as people arrive, many move on. Africans, for example, come to Italy and then head off to France, Germany, or Belgium. Former colonial subjects, on the other hand, if they're born there, already have British or Canadian citizenship; in Bangladesh, instead of staying with their families, many prefer to leave.

What unfolds is a transgenerational divergence: while Bangladeshi-origin youth in East London are now visible across professional sectors like

medicine, law, business, the children of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy confront enduring ceilings that keep them locked out of the professions and public positions that signal social recognition

Have you ever seen a foreigner here working as a doctor or a lawyer? No? Why is that? Are we foreigners less intelligent, are we Bangladeshis less capable? The real problem is that here, the future for foreign kids is blocked. You can't get into the positions that matter, you can't get prestigious jobs.

For many, this blocked horizon translates into exit strategies: emigration toward northern Europe, the UK, or Canada remains the rational pathway to circumvent national constraints. In Bachcu's reading, this pattern exposes Italy's failure to imagine itself as a country capable of metabolizing diversity beyond its instrumental needs. Yet beyond institutional frameworks or citizenship regimes, there is another layer that helps explain why the Bangladeshi presence in East London has managed to consolidate in ways that remain largely out of reach for their counterparts in Rome. It is, quite simply, a question of critical mass. The extraordinary demographic concentration of Bangladeshis in certain boroughs of East London, where neighbourhoods, schools, and commercial districts are dominated by co-ethnic networks, has created dense relational ecologies capable of sustaining collective advancement. In such contexts, the proximity of community members allows formal pathways into professional fields such as healthcare, law, and public administration

You see... in England, there are so many Asians working in hospitals. They're consultants, they run businesses, they're lawyers. Especially in East London, where it's full of Asians, no one refuses to be treated because the doctor is brown. That mentality here has to change. Maybe with Brexit now things will change, because here, the second generation has disappeared, everyone's left. Everyone knows that if you want a future, you have to leave, that Italy just isn't a country for foreigners.

Yet he also recognizes the unintended effects of recent shifts, particularly Brexit, which have begun to curtail the UK's absorptive capacity. In this new landscape, he hopes, the future of Italy's migrant second generation may finally unfold domestically, but only if the structural barriers to mobility are confronted. Without such change, as he bluntly puts it, Italy risks remaining a place "not for foreigners," where talented migrant youth continue to view departure as their only viable future

Brexit has changed things, though. Of course Brexit has slowed down new arrivals: now, even for an Italian citizen it's no longer automatic to go to the UK; you need a job contract, a specific visa, you have to prove you have at least £20,000 in savings and a university degree... It's no longer an "open bar" for Europe. In a way, I'm glad, because maybe now the children of immigrants will stay here in Italy and become doctors, judges, civil servants.

At this point of the conversation I brought the discussion back to the local political dynamics, asking whether the recent political campaign of Laila Shah – whom we have already encountered as one of the most visible Bangladeshi candidates in both municipal and regional elections – could be read as part of an attempt to alter the broader political standing of migrants in Italy. I wondered whether her campaign reflected not only an aspiration for local representation, but also, indirectly, a kind of symbolic emulation of the more established trajectories visible in places like London. After all, her public appearances seemed to carry a certain performative dimension: she held her rally in front of tens of cameras, but with little audience, and no Italian to attend at all, as I had personally witnessed, being the only Italian present. The scene itself seemed to underscore, once again, the peculiar paradox that runs through much of the migrant political engagement in Rome: a politics that aspires to recognition, yet continues to unfold largely within the internal boundaries of the community itself, rarely managing to translate its mobilization into broader alliances or cross-ethnic coalitions capable of shifting the terms of institutional participation.

Bachcu approached the matter with a tone that oscillated between realism and a kind of cautious pragmatism. He readily acknowledged that Laila's candidacy, while symbolically meaningful, was never truly expected to secure a significant number of votes. In his view, her presence on the list reflected less a broad-based effort to transform the political standing of migrants in Rome, and more the contingent dynamics of minor Italian parties like Demos, which, in the absence of stronger candidates, had strategically turned to immigrant communities to fill electoral slots. For the party, the inclusion of a Bangladeshi candidate served a tactical purpose, with little real expectation of altering electoral outcomes. Yet, for Bachcu, even this limited form of participation represented, at least in principle, a modest step forward, a small gesture of insertion into the Italian political landscape

So, with Laila's election... Laila really doesn't stand a chance of getting a lot of votes, not at all. But, to me, there's actually something positive: even the small parties, when they can't find candidates, they start looking at immigrants. Demos, for instance... what do they do? If they don't have enough candidates, they turn to immigrants. That's their approach. Immigrants or Bangladeshis, they already know what kind of results to expect. Out of a list of twenty people, maybe one or two get in, the other seventeen are left out, guaranteed. And that's fine: what matters is taking part. It's a cultural step, mixing Italian society with us, nothing more.

When asked about the extent of the campaign's outreach to Italian voters, Bachcu was equally blunt. In practice, he admitted, the electoral mobilization remained largely internal to the Bangladeshi community. Aside from a few scattered encounters – including my own presence at some of these events – little effort had been made to engage a broader Italian audience. Not because of overt exclusion, but because, as he pointed out, few within the community perceived any real political substance behind these candidacies that might resonate with Italian voters. The campaign lacked the organizational infrastructure, the public platforms, and, crucially, the capacity to articulate political programs addressing Italian constituencies. What is there instead is a more private, informal mobilization: friends persuading friends, acquaintances exchanging promises, a few dozen personal votes gathered through familiar networks. But little beyond that

Did you do much campaigning with Italians? Saturday, for example, it was just you all, right? Yes, just us. With Italians... let's be honest: if you try to talk to Italians... well, look, you found out about it by chance and showed up. Now you have Laila's leaflet, you'll vote for her. If there had been more people like you, maybe she would've gotten more votes. I went around a bit, but there was no real campaign toward the Italian community.

Bachcu was fully aware of these limitations. He openly acknowledged that the campaign lacked any real political program beyond the symbolic value of having a Bangladeshi name on the ballot. The candidate herself had no concrete proposals to address Italian social or political issues, nor any structured alliances with the established parties that might have amplified her visibility. The dynamic was less about programmatic politics and more about the private management of social capital: asking friends for personal favours, negotiating votes on a one-to-one basis, and in the end, securing little more than a few dozen votes based on popularity rather than political persuasion

Also, there's a problem: what does our candidates... Laila, for example, actually propose for Italian society? They can talk about "electoral" issues, but then what? You present a candidate, and that's it. Politically, there's no substance. Privately, sure: I know an Italian, I ask them «please vote». But political organising, debates... that doesn't exist. The candidate doesn't have a real public role, there's no party leadership behind them.

What became even more evident was the extent to which political participation among the Bangladeshi community remains fundamentally instrumental. As Bachcu explained, many potential voters within the community displayed little interest in public debates or broader discussions about policy. Politics, for most, reduced itself to a transactional logic: being told who to vote for, turning up on election day, and performing one's civic duty as a discrete, mechanical act. The notion of constructing broader coalitions, engaging with Italian voters, or developing substantive political platforms remained almost entirely absent. Part of this detachment, Bachcu suggested, stems from the widespread sense that these alliances are largely symbolic, with Italian parties offering little beyond token gestures. Many within the Bangladeshi community see themselves mobilized when convenient, but rarely as true political partners

In my experience, Bangladeshis who vote... if you invite them to a debate, they'll say «Why should I care? Just tell me who to vote for, I'll go on Sunday, make my cross and that's it». Because, who are we politically allied with? I don't trust the PD or the GD²⁴; for me, they're just idiots, idiots! Where was the one [politician] you saw that day? Now the garden is run by the PD: Municipio V, the technical office, the council, they give you authorisation for a festival; then the district president cancels everything for political reasons. That's politics.

The conflict surrounding the occupation of the public space we previously discussed offered a particularly vivid example of how local power struggles, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and political retaliation continue to shape the terms of engagement between migrant communities and Italian institutions. The fact that municipal authorities had initially authorized the use of the space, only to later revoke it for what he openly described as political reasons

²⁴ PD is the Democratic Party, the main centre-Left Italian Party, while the GD, the Young Democrats, is the youth section of the Democratic Party, which welcomes members up to the age of 30.

exemplified for Bachcu the deeply clientelistic logic that still governs much of local governance, and the reason why he moved his alliance with non-parliamentary extreme-left movements

So, we decided to take over the space—we occupied it, made a scene. Every time that guy, Bislur, came, they hit him with more than €14,000 in legal proceedings²⁵. You get it? I don't trust these people. That president... the technical office had approved everything, we paid for the public space, the health authorities, everything; and the president still cancelled it. You know, the president of the Municipio. When he was a candidate, we backed a rival candidate against him. We supported the other guy and he got angry. He then won, and for two years he's just been making trouble. You see? I don't believe in them.

Yet, despite his cynicism toward institutional politics, Bachcu recognized that electoral participation carried an undeniable prestige within the community itself. The mere fact of appearing on a party list, however marginal, elevated one's personal visibility and generated new opportunities for status accumulation. This, in turn, feeds into a dynamic of internal rivalry and jealousy: while many lacked either the ambition or the courage to stand for office themselves, they were equally reluctant to fully support those who did. The prospect of one individual achieving visibility generates a mixture of pride and latent rivalry, revealing how leadership positions, while coveted, can simultaneously expose unresolved tensions within the group. Many, as Bachcu observes, hesitate to step forward themselves, yet struggle to fully endorse others who do

Running with an Italian party also a matter of prestige, so there's also a bit of jealousy: if one of us becomes a councillor, gets visibility, contacts... some people say «Why her? Why not me?». It's jealousy, not real hostility. If she becomes a councillor, she has an important role, more visibility, so some people get jealous. They don't want to be in the spotlight, but they also can't accept it if someone else is.

²⁵ A Bangladeshi man in financial difficulties to whom Bachcu had entrusted the task of guarding the occupied park, sleeping there and watching over it 24 hours a day.



Figure 23 Laila's main campaign event, personal photo taken in February 2023



Political candidacies thus became sites of ambivalent aspiration, blending limited opportunities for upward mobility with competitive logics of personal prestige. Even the forms of public visibility achieved through social media, which Bachcu proudly noted, citing tens of thousands of views and followers, remain largely contained within the diasporic bubble of Rome, with little resonance beyond. Only in the event of a breakthrough into higher levels of national office, he notes, would such political activity begin to

register on the transnational radar of the wider Bangladeshi diaspora, or attract the attention of media in Bangladesh itself. For now, these efforts remained highly localized in a form of community politics that offered moments of symbolic recognition but little in the way of structural transformation.

So, is there interest in Bangladesh in what happens here? Not yet. If someone became mayor or an MP, then the media back home would talk about it. For now, the interest is just among the diaspora in Rome. We start from 170 votes: that's not enough. a lot of video coverage, live streams... Yes, on Facebook! We've had more than fifty thousand views by now. Maybe twenty-three or twenty-four thousand people—I don't remember exactly—but a lot. Yes, there's definitely attention. But it stays at the local, Roman level. If someone was running for mayor in London, Bengali TV would talk about it; here, no.

What emerges here, once again, is the particular asymmetry that shapes the transnational imaginary of the Bangladeshi diaspora. The electoral campaigns and public initiatives unfolding in Rome, though locally significant, struggle to break beyond the confined perimeter of the immediate community. The tens of thousands of views on social media reveal a degree of attention, but one that remains largely internal to the Roman context. For now, these forms of political engagement circulate mostly as markers of localized visibility, insufficient to activate the broader diasporic gaze across transnational circuits. Bachcu describes, more or less implicitly, a political attitude that operates in the shadow of the more established diasporic centre represented by London, where South Asian actors have long since occupied more prominent institutional positions, gaining access to platforms that resonate both within the host society and back in Bangladesh. It is only at higher levels such as Mayor offices or parliamentary seats that the diasporic media circuits in Bangladesh would begin to register these trajectories as collectively meaningful. Until then, the symbolic capital produced in Rome remains fragile, circulating largely within a closed loop of communal recognition and internal competition. In this sense, Rome's Bangladeshi presence continues to operate under the gravitational pull of London as both an aspirational horizon and a constant term of competition.

6.5 Torpignattara “Banglatown”

The ways in which public visibility has come to configure itself around the Bangladeshi presence in Rome cannot be fully grasped without placing them against the broader backdrop we traced so far. If, as we have seen, the political incorporation of Bangladeshis into the British system unfolded through a progressively structured form of engagement which, beginning in the postwar decades, gradually led to the emergence of a whole class of ethnic politicians and institutional interlocutors, no equivalent dynamic has thus far taken root in the Roman context. In a manner that echoes, albeit partially, some of the reactions encountered by early Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants in Britain during the volatile 1970s, the consolidation of a visible Bangladeshi presence in Torpignattara has in fact gradually generated discomfort and open hostility among certain segments of the local population, but, while in the East End of London these dynamics would eventually catalyse strong anti-racist mobilizations and sharpen the political consciousness of the younger generation, the Roman case remains more fragmented and suspended, lacking both the scale of institutional conflict and the organized forms of political resistance that came to define the British trajectory. In Rome, accordingly, the space left open by the absence of a comparable institutional accommodation has been filled, over time, by forms of visibility that, though not discreditable, are limited mainly to cultural, commercial, and religious features. The proliferation of Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores, halal butchers, clothing shops, and small restaurants across areas like Torpignattara has become one of the most tangible markers of the community's settlement. Parallel to this, the steady multiplication of cultural events and public celebrations, outdoor festivals and collective prayer meetings has served to cultivate internal solidarity while simultaneously projecting an increasingly recognizable presence into the shared public space of the neighborhood. This grassroots visibility, however, has not unfolded without consequences.

6.5.1 Tensions, visibility and hyper-attention

Beginning in the mid-2010s, and particularly in the period marked by recurring Islamist terror attacks across Europe in the years between 2015 and 2017, the presence of Muslim religious infrastructure in the neighbourhood began to attract renewed attention. Makeshift mosques, often housed in basements or garages, had long been tolerated as necessary adaptations to

the needs of a growing community²⁶. But in that political climate, they began to be reframed as potential security threats. Concerns about “unauthorized worship spaces” were no longer framed in terms of zoning laws or noise complaints but recast within a broader climate of national anxiety. Despite being anchored in the ordinary, these presences became the object of exceptional scrutiny once layered with the projections of national fears. Local political actors, some aligned with far-right rhetoric and others simply responding to neighbourhood pressures, launched petitions and inspections. In 2017, this culminated in the closure of Masjeed-e-Rome, one of the principal Bangladeshi prayer halls in Via Gabrio Serbelloni. Official justifications cited structural irregularities, but for many in the community, the intervention had a clear symbolic charge: it marked a threshold, a reminder of the fragile boundaries within which migrant religious life is allowed to operate²⁷. The response from the community was swift. In a gesture that mirrored the very logic of visibility now under attack, hundreds of Bangladeshi residents gathered publicly in the streets of Torpignattara to perform Friday prayers. What would normally be an intimate and interior act was deliberately relocated to the public sphere an inversion of space that functioned both as protest and as affirmation of presence. Similar actions took place across other neighborhoods, from Centocelle to Esquilino, but the one that resonated the most was the collective prayer organised in front of the Colosseum, which was reported in all the local newspapers and has remained etched in the memory of many Romans²⁸. All of that suggested how religious marginalization was not a localized anomaly but part of a wider urban politics of Muslim visibility in Rome.

²⁶ In Italy, the legal framework requires that any religion seeking full institutional recognition must first negotiate an *Intesa*, a formal agreement with the state approved by parliament. While Catholicism benefits from it, and several minority religions have secured such agreements, no *intesa* has ever been signed with Islam. In the absence of this legal status, Muslim communities cannot access public funding or build officially recognized places of worship, forcing most mosques to operate in makeshift, legally precarious spaces.

²⁷ An interesting overview of the issue can be found in the US Embassy's 2019 report on religious freedom in Italy <https://it.usembassy.gov/it/irf-2019-italia/#:~:text=Ad%20aprile%20la%20polizia%20ha,risede%20una%20consistente%20comunità>.

²⁸ <https://roma.fanpage.it/musulmani-di-roma-in-preghiera-al-colosseo-chiediamo-al-comune-spazi-per-le-moschee/>.



Figure 24 End of Ramadan celebrations 2023, photo sent to me by one of the organisers

In this sense, the very everydayness of these micro-conflicts carries a paradoxical quality: their apparent banality masks both their cumulative weight and their latent volatility. Unlike spectacular acts of violence or overt racist campaigns, these mundane frictions unfold incrementally, slowly sedimenting into the social geography of the neighborhood. They are the forms through which inequality is often most effectively naturalized—not as open conflict, but as quiet and routinized forms of discomfort and differentiation embedded in the practices of daily life.

And yet, something else happened. The attention generated by this sequence of events did not remain confined to the Bangladeshi community alone. It acted, in some sense, as a trigger. Among sections of local civil society and intercultural organizations, it produced a form of moral mobilization. Though on a far smaller scale than what occurred in London decades earlier, and without direct coordination, the shock of exclusion elicited a reactive solidarity.

6.5.2 Responses from below and forms of intercultural self-organisation

Unlike the more institutionalized and politically mature trajectory followed by the Bangladeshi community in East London, the landscape that has taken shape in Rome reveals a markedly different form of diasporic consolidation. Here, the search for representation has not materialized through formal channels of political integration, nor translated into strategic alliances with mainstream Italian parties. Rather, what emerges is a model

of political minimalism: a form of self-organization deeply rooted in the symbolic prestige of transnational connection, especially with London, yet largely circumscribed to the internal arena of the diaspora itself.

In this context, electoral candidacies such as those of Laila Shah or, though less, the activism of controversial figures like Bachcu do not appear to aim at structural transformation or long-term institutional positioning. Instead, they often serve to affirm visibility within the community, or to reproduce forms of prestige that circulate primarily among diasporic audiences. What takes shape, then, is less a confrontation with Italian politics than a parallel dynamic of intra-diasporic competition, where the real interlocutors are not Italian institutions, but other Bangladeshi actors in Rome, in London or in Bangladesh.

This lack of outward-facing political engagement does not mean that the Bangladeshi presence hasn't produced important practical effects. On the contrary, the high density of settlement, the proliferation of cultural and religious initiatives, and the everyday prominence of Bangladeshi-owned shops and mosques brought about benefits that are not marginal. For many, they translate into tangible forms of support and recognition, of easier access to mutual aid and of a sense of cultural familiarity derived by the possibility to fully enjoy relational sociability, that is not to be taken for granted in areas where the presence of someone who shares the same horizons, moral codes and difficulties is much more scattered. The concerns associated with greater dispersion, often underestimated, run through all the voices we have heard so far, especially that of Ariful, and those we will hear later on. In contexts of precarious legality or marginal labour conditions, such internal cohesion often serves as a buffer, providing not only emotional comfort but also practical survival strategies. made the community highly visible within the urban fabric of Torpignattara. The very concentration that sustains tight social networks and reinforces intragroup solidarity has also produced, perhaps inadvertently, an undeniable mark on the territory.

At the same time, however, as discussed, this visibility has been perceived by some residents and segments of local institutions as signs of excessive otherness, triggering forms of discomfort, resentment, and in certain cases, open hostility.

Yet, precisely because of this growing visibility, another phenomenon has gradually come into view. Without a clear strategy on the part of the Bangladeshi community itself, and often without their explicit involvement, the neighbourhood has begun to act as a kind of catalyst. A series of Italian-

led organizations, grassroots initiatives, and intercultural experiments have been mobilized in response not to a direct request from the migrants, but to the material reality of their presence. It is as if the density of life in Torpignattara has forced local civil society to develop new tools of recognition and response, to make sense of a landscape that can no longer be narrated through the binary of inclusion versus exclusion.

We can describe this phenomenon as an instance of bottom-up institutional pressure. The Bangladeshi community, while not consciously lobbying for change, has contributed to producing a context in which other actors such as schools, NGOs, neighborhood committees and cultural projects have begun to reposition themselves. As a result, the initial reactions of rejection or suspicion have, in some cases, given way to what might be described as an effect of “gathering around” in a defensive embrace, a reconfiguration of civic belonging that seeks to stabilize the urban social fabric by embracing its transformation.

This shift is neither linear nor universal. It does not erase the persistence of racism, nor does it fully dissolve the asymmetries of power that define access to rights and resources. But it does suggest that the Bangladeshi presence in Rome, however politically marginal or institutionally peripheral, has helped reconfiguring the grammar through which diversity is understood and negotiated at the local level. Not by directly engaging Italian politics, but by compelling it, through sheer presence, to take notice. If the closures of prayer spaces and the periodic waves of securitarian concern have marked one face of Torpignattara’s encounter with the politics of diversity, the other face emerges from a stratified and strong network of institutions, civic organisations and local experiments in coexistence that are far more numerous, active and present than in the other neighbourhoods and Municipalities of Rome. In the absence of a coherent national or municipal policy capable of recognizing and managing the pluralization of its urban spaces, much of the work of integration, both symbolic and material, has unfolded at the micro level, shaped by everyday actors operating well beneath the radar of formal governance.

At the heart of these processes sits the school system, and few sites exemplify this more vividly than the Carlo Pisacane elementary school. In the early 2000s, Pisacane became a minor national controversy, widely cited in the media as the school that was “too full of foreigners.” Initial parental protests and fears of ethnic segregation sparked debates around the capacity

of Italian institutions to manage the growing diversity within their own classrooms. Yet what might have crystallized into a story of retreat and withdrawal instead produced one of the clearest examples of gradual accommodation (Fioretti 2011; Vereni 2014). Through sustained efforts by teachers, parents, and local associations, Pisacane slowly transformed into a laboratory of educational inclusion. The transformation did not unfold without friction. Early parental anxieties, particularly among segments of the long-term Italian residents, often echoed broader national fears of displacement, loss of cultural continuity, and the erosion of a supposedly homogeneous civic identity. Yet rather than collapse into permanent retreat or parallel schooling structures, the crisis at Pisacane activated a different response. Teachers and administrators worked closely with both Italian and migrant parents to establish collaborative frameworks that could address linguistic, cultural, and educational gaps. The creation of the parents' association Pisacane 0-99²⁹ signaled not only a shift in attitude but also the emergence of a shared civic project capable of reconciling anxieties with the daily realities of intercultural schooling.



Figure 25 The corridors of the Pisacane school, personal photo taken in May 2022

²⁹ Pisacane 099 is an association coordinating educational and social activities around Carlo Pisacane school in Rome, acting as a bridge between children, families, local organizations, and institutions. It supports community engagement through co-designed projects, training, and participatory workshops, aiming to strengthen the educational and cultural role of the school.

Beyond the school gates, Pisacane increasingly became a hub around which a broader associational ecology crystallized. Volunteer groups initiated Italian language courses specifically for migrant parents, often mothers who, because of limited linguistic and social capital, had been largely excluded from their children's educational journeys.

Asinitas, for instance, became one of the key actors in this ecosystem, providing language training and professional counselling for migrant women, many of them Bangladeshi. What these interventions achieved was not only the provision of immediate practical support but also the creation of spaces where symbolic boundaries between old and new residents could begin to soften, and where second-generation children found partial bridges between their home cultures and their surrounding environment. Asinitas quickly evolved into a multifaceted space for empowerment, offering not only Italian classes but also professional orientation services, legal counselling, and opportunities for collective reflection and support. Many of the Bangladeshi women who attend Asinitas speak of the organization as a rare point of entry into public life, a space where linguistic, cultural, and gender barriers can be confronted in ways that are both practical and deeply personal.

Parallel to these educational dynamics, another experiment in community narration and symbolic re-inscription took shape through the Ecomuseo Casilino Ad Duas Lauros. Conceived not as a traditional museum but as a participatory platform for collective memory-making and the patrimonialisation of urban landscapes, the Ecomuseo set out to document the multiple temporal layers that define Torpignattara's urban fabric. Through oral histories, photographic archives, and local storytelling, the project actively involved both older Italian residents, many of whom retain deep attachments to the neighborhood's working-class past, and newer migrant communities.



Figure 26 One of the events organised by Asinitas, personal photo taken in December 2024

Alongside the dynamics already unfolding around Pisacane and the Ecomuseo Casilino, the experience of the cultural association Bianco e Nero has gradually established itself as another important piece in this local ecology. For years, Bianco e Nero has promoted the Karawan Festival, which has become one of the most stable and enduring occasions of intercultural gathering within the neighbourhood. Each summer, for a few days, Parco Sangalli, one of the most appreciated public spaces by Bangladeshis in the neighbourhood, is transformed into a temporary arena of screenings, conversations, and debates. On its screens circulate stories of migration, diaspora, and coexistence, drawn from different parts of the world, quietly inscribing these global trajectories into the everyday landscape of the neighborhood.

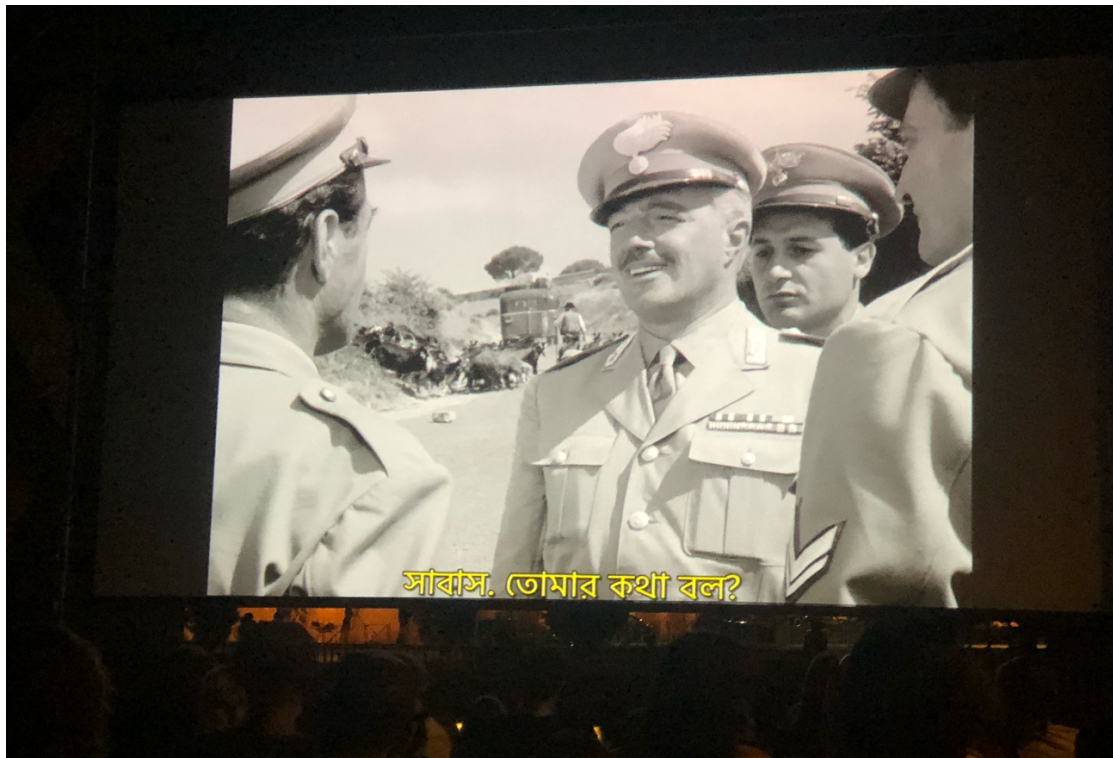


Figure 27 One of the Karawan Festival screenings, personal photo taken in September 2023

6.6 Mitul and the sense of home

Mitul's account offers yet another angle from which to grasp the layered ways in which belonging and social entanglement unfold within Torpignattara. A Bangladeshi woman, mother of two teenage daughters both born in Rome, Mitul has long anchored her life in this part of the city. Her daily work as a cultural mediator with Asinitas, supporting newly arrived migrant women as they navigate linguistic and bureaucratic barriers, even inside the maternity wards of the local hospital, has, over time, merged with her own experience of settling into the neighborhood. The boundary between personal and professional has grown increasingly porous.

Her husband would rather leave the neighbourhood. For years now, he has insisted they should move elsewhere, frustrated by the impossibility of finding adequate housing within the increasingly saturated rental market of the area. And yet, for Mitul, the very thought of leaving remains difficult to accept. What attaches her to Torpignattara is a sense of groundedness in the density of lives, languages, and trajectories that converge here. The presence of many immigrant families, she reflects, creates a kind of mutual recognition that allows people to read, almost instinctively, each other's

difficulties and vulnerabilities, and to acknowledge them without grand gestures

My husband has always lived in Torpignattara, even before I joined him, and for some years now he's wanted to move out of Torpignattara, because honestly, we just can't find a house, that's the real reason. He says we could find other places, but I don't agree with moving, so we just can't agree on this. I like it here. I really feel at home in this neighbourhood. In our neighbourhood, I see there are so many different ethnicities, so many nationalities living together. Yes, there are arguments, shoutings... between Italians too, right? So this mix, I really like it. Also, thanks to my job, you know, I've been able to meet so many people from so many countries, and it's given me so much experience that honestly, every time, I feel grateful to this neighbourhood, for giving me the chance to meet these people, to live close to them, to work with them... that's something special. In other neighbourhoods, there are fewer ethnicities, and maybe also more distance between people, right? Here in Torpignattara, there are more immigrants, you know? So maybe we understand each other's needs, each other's struggles, and also each other's happiness, a bit more.

This proximity, in her account, is not romanticized. There are tensions, arguments, and misunderstandings, as she puts it, both among Italians and among migrants themselves. But for her, these frictions are part of the reality of living together. What matters is that in this neighbourhood, unlike others she has observed, diversity does not simply exist in parallel, but forces people into a daily negotiation of difference. The absence of clear separations produces something that feels, to her, more genuine: not harmonious coexistence, but the possibility of encounter. In Mitul's words, this concentration of immigrant presence has created a practical awareness, among migrants themselves, that their situations, though diverse in origin, are in many ways structurally aligned. They face similar precarities, similar frustrations and victories. And it is this partial symmetry that, for her, generates the sense that Torpignattara, despite its limitations, continues to offer something she would not easily find elsewhere.

The transformation of local schooling environments, as Mitul recounted, offers a revealing window into the slow recalibration of institutional postures toward diversity in Torpignattara. For years, some of the schools in the neighbourhood had remained markedly rigid, particularly in their unwillingness to adapt to the demographic shifts occurring just outside their gates. Rigid, in her words, did not mean outright hostility, but rather a form of passive institutional inertia, a reluctance to actively engage parents from

migrant backgrounds, an absence of collaboration, and a hesitancy to recognize the shifting composition of their student bodies as anything other than a temporary aberration

Things are changing a lot. I have to be honest. Even the schools. Because in the neighbourhood there are two very important schools, and one of them used to be really rigid, I have to say, but things are changing now. Rigid meaning... how can I say? Not integration, less collaboration with parents. But in the last three or four years, things have really improved, so now there are more outings, more activities, you know... workshops for the children, training for the teachers... The fact that there are more children from foreign backgrounds actually helps this process. That's what I mean by rigidity.

Mitul's account pointed to an underlying structural problem: for much of the early 2000s and into the following decade, attempts to foster meaningful participation from non-Italian parents were rare and often superficial. Mediation programs existed largely in name, offered only sporadically or on a purely individual basis, with limited outreach and minimal effectiveness. Parents were either not informed or, when present, unable to follow the content of meetings and activities that were never truly designed for them. In practice, what passed for "inclusion" amounted to little more than administrative formalities, a kind of procedural integration devoid of any real investment in communication or reciprocity.

Yet, in recent years, the pressure of numbers has begun to force a recalibration. As the proportion of children from migrant families steadily increased, often surpassing 50 or even 60 percent in certain classrooms, it became increasingly untenable to continue operating on logics designed for a bygone, more homogeneous student population. As Mitul observed, the growing presence of foreign pupils placed a quiet but undeniable strain on pedagogical routines that could no longer afford to treat linguistic and cultural diversity as peripheral

I think now they're starting to understand that change is needed. Before, maybe they just couldn't accept it, I don't know. Even with Pisacane we work a lot together, we organise workshops, they come here, we go there with the kids, even with the teachers. But before, they didn't accept these things. Even mediation... they rarely did any mediation, but now there are so many kids that, when parents came, it was either on an individual basis or sometimes in groups, but there wasn't much interest. Either people didn't come, or if they did, they didn't really understand anything, and that's not integration. We need to make sure people understand, or at least try.

What is striking, however, is that this shift did not emerge from any top-down policy reform, but rather through a gradual generational turnover within the teaching staff itself. The older cohort of teachers, those who had been most resistant to changing their pedagogical frameworks, gradually retired or stepped aside, replaced by younger professionals who, having grown up in a more globalized and heterogeneous environment, approached diversity less as a crisis and more as an ordinary feature of contemporary urban life. The generational shift thus produced a form of incremental adaptation

But now, things are changing a lot, yes. Also because, you know, the teachers' group, they've changed a lot of teachers, especially the older ones who really didn't want change. They've left, retired, so now there are new teachers who are discovering the world.

These shifts unfolded not only at the level of personnel but also in the pedagogical infrastructure itself. New workshops, training sessions, and cooperative programs between schools like Pisacane and external organizations such as Asinitas began to proliferate. Intercultural laboratories involving both children and teachers allowed forms of shared learning to take place that transcended narrow models of one-directional integration. In this context, Mitul's own role as a cultural mediator becomes emblematic of a broader recalibration: her work at the hospital and in the schools represents not only technical assistance but the gradual embedding of pluralist expertise directly into the institutional fabric. But perhaps most striking in Mitul's reflection is the sense of cautious pragmatism that permeates her narrative. There is little trace of triumphalism or naïve celebration of diversity. Instead, what she offers is a clear-eyed account of the slow, often contested process through which rigid institutional postures give way under the cumulative weight of demographic inevitability and the quiet labour of actors positioned at the intersection between the state and the social margins. As she frames it, change has come not because institutions eagerly sought it, but because the ground beneath them shifted to the point where adaptation became unavoidable.

As our conversation continued, Mitul shifted, almost cautiously, toward a set of concerns that reveal another layer of complexity in the everyday experience of cohabitation in Torpignattara. The very concentration that gives meaning to her experience, that is the diversity, the proximity and the

richness of encounter, carries within it the seeds of a more fragile, unsettling possibility. She speaks of a certain unease emerging on both sides, as if the balance that has so far allowed for a dense, layered coexistence might risk tipping into something else entirely

You know, maybe people outside also think that because there are so many of us here, there's more attention on the area. And when that happens, I just hope it doesn't turn into a ghetto... that's something I really feel, maybe for the future, because we've started buying houses now, buying properties. So, I don't know, maybe little by little Italians will start leaving the neighbourhood. That would make me sad, honestly. Because if it's just us, it wouldn't really be, how can I explain, it wouldn't be the place we started out with, right? So I'd like things to stay as they were, everyone together.

The issue is the growing visibility of property ownership among Bangladeshi families themselves. After years of precarious rental arrangements, more are now in a position to buy apartments, a development that, in many ways, signals a form of stabilization and long-term anchoring in the neighbourhood. Yet for Mitul, this trend also raises uncomfortable questions. The prospect that Italian families might increasingly choose to leave – not for any organized form of displacement, but through the slow, accumulative effect of minor tensions and an underlying discomfort with the changing social composition – troubles her deeply. She fears the homogeneity emerging as the consequence of the possible withdrawal of Italians, which could fracture the fragile pluralism that has so far endured. What is striking, in Mitul's reflection, is her acute sensitivity to the terms of coexistence itself. The problem, for her, is not that more Bangladeshis arrive, or that families succeed in securing housing stability, nor completely that Italians remain present in the neighbourhood. The tension emerges, rather, from the social interpretation attached to these movements: if Italians leave because they feel that shared life has become unviable, that interethnic proximity is unmanageable, then something essential is being lost.

There is, here, a subtle but important echo of what we've been discussing so far regarding the peculiar way of coexistence in diversity of this neighbourhood. Torpignattara, in Mitul's account, remains suspended between two potential trajectories. The density of migrant presence creates both a scaffold for mutual support and, simultaneously, an optic through which Italians may read their society as increasingly foreign and less

homogeneous. Her worry is that once the interpretive frame shifts from balanced coexistence to dispersion, the departure of Italian residents may reinforce precisely the kind of segregation that everyone claims to fear

Yes, more of us are coming, but that doesn't mean people need to leave to make us space. We should mix together. Because if people leave simply because they're ready to move on, that's one thing, that's fine, we leave the space for someone else. But if they leave because they feel we can't live together, that's something else. So, I can't really say for sure that's what's happening, but it's a feeling I have. Maybe people are starting to think we just can't live together.

At the heart of this lies a kind of moral negotiation: a desire to preserve a form of mixed, imperfect, but meaningful sociality, against the gravitational pull of separation. The vision Mitul holds onto is not one of exclusionary ownership but of sustained mixture, of neighbourhoods where cultural multiplicity remains grounded in proximity, mutual recognition, and everyday familiarity. What she fears is not the density of Bangladeshi presence itself, but the narratives that might crystallize around it, slowly eroding the informal infrastructures of contact that have so far made Torpignattara feel, for her, not just habitable but profoundly liveable.

Chapter 6 - Conclusions

The research conducted in the preceding chapters has sought to illuminate the specific dynamics through which the Bangladeshi presence in Rome –in particular its highly localized concentration in the neighborhood of Torpignattara – can be interpreted within broader transnational, postcolonial, and urban integration frameworks. The peculiar density of the Bangladeshi settlement in a single Roman neighbourhood, as extensively mapped in chapter two, stands as an exceptional case within the Italian migratory landscape, otherwise characterized by more dispersed and fragmented migrant spatial distributions. What emerges from this investigation is a reading of the Bangladeshi case in Torpignattara that cannot be fully understood through the conventional literature on the topic. Instead, it calls for a conceptual reorientation that takes seriously the weight of transnational diasporic imaginaries, particularly those rooted in the long historical experience of the Bangladeshi migration toward the United Kingdom.

As discussed in the opening chapters, the United Kingdom, and specifically London, has historically served as the epicentre of the Bangladeshi diaspora, deeply inscribed in both collective memory and practical migratory imaginaries. The colonial histories, the privileged status granted to Commonwealth citizens, the extensive public policies on multiculturalism and civic inclusion, and the cumulative effects of generations of political, economic, and cultural participation have generated, over the decades, a powerful gravitational pull around the London model. In many ways, this London-centred diasporic narrative functions as what I have termed, throughout this work, a form of *multipresence*, namely a condition in which migratory trajectories and diasporic belongings are not simply located within one national context, but continually refracted through a transnational optic where local experiences are constantly evaluated against, compared to, and judged in relation to the British-Bangladeshi paradigm.

This dynamic has deeply marked the way in which Bangladeshi migrants who ultimately settled in Rome have perceived and negotiated their own settlement paths. As several interlocutors articulated during fieldwork, the inability to complete the migration trajectory toward the United Kingdom –because of the increasingly restrictive UK immigration controls or

economic limitations – has not eliminated the symbolic weight of London as a point of reference. Rather, it has engendered a form of compensatory emulation: for those who have redirected their routes toward other countries like Italy, the question of *how to measure up* remains latent, feeding an underlying tension that structures many aspects of Bangladeshi organization, spatial concentration, and modes of public visibility.

In this perspective, the emergence of Torpignattara as a spatially concentrated Bangladeshi settlement can be read precisely as the local expression of this transnational dynamic. As argued in chapter two, while Italy has never adopted policies akin to British multiculturalism, and in fact continues to operate largely within paradigms of culturalist assimilation and exclusion, the Bangladeshi presence in Torpignattara has nonetheless produced, almost unintentionally, a micro-configuration that recalls certain aspects of ethnic clustering familiar in East London, allowed partially also by the multicultural approach. The concentration of businesses, mosques, community associations, language schools, cultural events and everyday social life within a limited urban space has allowed for the consolidation of what may be described as a localized diasporic urbanity, namely a form of collective social comfort, mutual support and culturally cohesive public presence that, while fragile, offers partial insulation from the precarities and exclusions that characterize much of the broader Italian migratory regime.

At the heart of this process lies the production of what Taylor and Whittier define as *collective identity*: a shared definition of the group that emerges not merely from common interests but through struggles that actively shape consciousness, boundaries, and negotiation practices. The consolidation of the Bangladeshi presence in Torpignattara reflects precisely these three components: spatial boundaries that distinguish the community both physically and symbolically from the dominant Italian society; a growing group consciousness that emerges from shared narratives of marginalization, transnational aspiration, and survival; and everyday negotiations — both tacit and explicit — that allow community members to sustain their presence amidst complex systems of formal exclusion and informal adaptation, giving rise to forms of voluntary kinship understood as a network of people united by a common purpose and mutual help relationships, even if not bound by biological ties (Tierney and Venegas 2006).

Critically, however, as argued throughout chapter five, this emergent form of spatial visibility sits uneasily within the Italian institutional and discursive frameworks of diversity governance. Italian migration policy has historically combined the legal marginalization of non-citizen residents with highly selective naturalization regimes and an enduring narrative of foreignness tied to somatic difference. As explored in chapter one, Italy's postcolonial condition — marked by its ambiguous relationship to its own imperial past and its belated engagement with mass migration — has rendered the management of ethno-racial diversity a field of considerable tension. In this context, high-density foreign settlements, particularly those marked by strong non-European and Muslim presences, have often been perceived not as signs of social integration, but rather as threats to the presumed cultural coherence of national belonging.

Yet, as the interviews collected in chapters four and five have repeatedly demonstrated, the Bangladeshi community in Torpignattara has, in many respects, navigated this tension not through open contestation of the Italian model, but rather through a form of strategic intra-group consolidation. The repeated comparisons made by interlocutors between their condition in Rome and the experiences of relatives or acquaintances in London highlight the dual axis that structures their migratory horizon: on one side, the desire to replicate, even in a diminished form, the collective dignity and political recognition achieved by their British counterparts; on the other, the practical necessity of managing their marginality within a national context where full political incorporation remains systematically deferred.

It is in this oscillation that the peculiar politics of density in Torpignattara takes shape. The concentration of Bangladeshi residents has indeed produced a form of hyper-visibility that, while granting internal social comfort and allowing for vibrant associational and cultural life, has simultaneously triggered waves of public concern, media sensationalism, and state interventions aimed at reasserting normative boundaries around acceptable migrant presence. The contested proliferation of prayer spaces, the securitarian closures of mosques in the years following the terrorist attacks in Europe and the recurring cycles of moral panic over urban “ghettoization”, all these phenomena illustrate how the same density that fosters community reproduction also generates its vulnerabilities.

However, what emerges from the analysis is that these tensions have not led to a retreat into defensive isolation. Rather, they have paradoxically activated broader networks of solidarity within the Italian civil society and urban social fabric. As discussed in chapter five, the response to rising anti-Muslim sentiment and local institutional repression of religious spaces found an echo in the mobilization of hybrid coalitions – including Italian neighborhood associations, leftist political collectives, educational networks and antiracist organizations – that positioned Torpignattara as an experimental ground for alternative forms of grassroots intercultural engagement. In this sense, the high visibility of the Bangladeshi presence has, even without deliberate political strategizing on the part of the community itself, inadvertently pushed segments of the local society to address issues of diversity, recognition, and minority rights more directly.

This emergent ecology of advocacy has proven particularly salient in the educational sphere. As detailed in the analysis of the Carlo Pisacane elementary school and the work of Asinitas and related associations, the hyperconcentration of foreign-origin children, a condition initially problematized by Italian parents as a threat to the school's identity, has, over time, fostered new pedagogical collaborations, intercultural curricula, and cross-community parental engagement. In these micro-territorial educational practices, one observes the gradual sedimentation of an alternative model of inclusion: not one predicated on state-led multicultural frameworks, but rather one forged through negotiated, everyday social proximity.

Importantly, these processes have also carried distinct gendered dimensions. For many Bangladeshi women, often excluded from public life both by patriarchal norms within the community and by structural barriers in the host society, the density of Torpignattara has opened up access to educational programs, social networks, and forms of employment, albeit often precarious, that would have been less accessible in more dispersed settlement patterns. The existence of community organizations as well as language schools and labor orientation programs, has offered partial avenues of empowerment that, while not dismantling the gendered inequalities inherent in the migration experience, nonetheless provide limited spaces for autonomy and social participation.

The same applies, in differentiated ways, to the experiences of second-generation youth. As several interlocutors highlighted, the relative strength in numbers that the Bangladeshi youth enjoy in Torpignattara's schools, sports clubs, and public spaces fosters a degree of normalized visibility that mitigates, at least partially, the somatic and cultural marginalization often encountered elsewhere in Italian society. While full civic inclusion remains structurally restricted by Italy's citizenship laws and the broader societal reluctance to fully embrace post-migration diversity, these youth nonetheless inhabit an urban micro-environment where their presence feels less anomalous, and where peer networks can serve as partial buffers against experiences of exclusion.

At the same time, however, this dense ethnic clustering also poses longer-term ambivalences. The very processes that allow for internal social reproduction may risk reinforcing horizontal segregation, particularly if institutional responses fail to translate localized coexistence into broader systemic reforms. As some interlocutors expressed, the danger of a "ghettoization" dynamic, albeit different in nature and scale from British or American urban patterns, remains latent, particularly if Italian families progressively withdraw from shared spaces and if opportunities for cross-group interaction diminish. The challenge, therefore, is not simply one of recognizing the value of localized forms of multipresence, but of ensuring that such configurations do not become enclosed socio-spatial niches unable to translate their vitality into broader civic transformations.

In this light, the case of Torpignattara illustrates both the risks and the possibilities inherent in a context where state policies remain limited, fragmented, and largely reactive, yet where civil society actors can nonetheless emerge as critical intermediaries in the daily governance of diversity. As argued in chapter one, Italy's belated and reluctant engagement with its own postcolonial entanglements, and its enduring attachment to exclusionary imaginaries of national homogeneity, continue to delimit the formal structures of migrant incorporation. Yet, at the neighborhood level, the density of the Bangladeshi presence in Torpignattara – itself a consequence of complex transnational logics rather than domestic integration policies – has acted as an unintentional catalyst for forms of local accommodation, negotiation, and, in some cases, progressive experimentation.

What this research tried to suggest is that the emulation of the London model by the Bangladeshi diaspora in Rome, while operating on a vastly different institutional terrain, may not necessarily constitute an obstacle to integration, as much of the Italian literature tends to suggest. Instead, when read through the narratives and lived experiences of the actors themselves, this concentration appears to perform a compensatory function: offering dignity, social capital, and communal recognition in the absence of more formalized state recognition. If integration is to be conceived not as a fixed institutional formula but as a continually negotiated process shaped by both state structures and bottom-up practices, then the Torpignattara experience demonstrates that peripheral urban spaces can, under certain conditions, serve as incubators for more plural, context-sensitive pathways of inclusion.

In a society where cultural, religious, and somatic difference remains heavily contested, such micro-level forms of multipresence may, paradoxically, hold the potential to push the boundaries of national imaginaries, albeit incrementally and unevenly. Whether these localized accommodations can translate into broader structural shifts remains an open question that future research will be called upon to address.

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