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**Is there still space for
Bangladesh in the Bidesh?**

**REFLECTIONS ON
SECOND GENERATION
BRITISH BANGLADESHI IDENTITY**

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Abstract

Londense Brits-Bengalese migranten van de tweede generatie zien hun identiteit anders dan hun ouders, die in Bangladesh geboren zijn, of hun grootouders, die daar gebleven zijn. Deze thesis is opgebouwd rond de vraag welke plaats 'Bangladesh' dan nog heeft in hun identiteitsvorming. Achttien onderzoekssubjecten gingen akkoord om een reeks open vragen eerlijk te beantwoorden. Uit dit kwalitatief onderzoek, dat aan academische literatuur getoetst werd volgens het principe van Grounded Theory Method, blijkt dat hun land van oorsprong enkel onderhuids cruciaal blijft. Dit merken we aan aspecten zoals geschiedenis, ruimte, cultuur en taal. Sommige deelnemers vonden hun etnie belangrijker, maar uit onderzoek naar elementen zoals familie en bezoeken aan het land van oorsprong blijkt dat niet iedereen die mening toebedeeld is. Andere facetten nemen de bovenhand. Het land waarin ze geboren zijn, en vooral dan de multiculturele stad waar ze al hun hele leven wonen, nemen een cruciale plaats in binnen hun identiteit. Religie is niettemin het belangrijkste facet van hun identiteit: hun basisidentiteit. Alle achttien spreken over de rol die Islam speelt in hun dagdagelijkse leven. Door het belang dat zij hechten aan de wereldwijde moslimgemeenschap, kunnen deze 'British Bangladeshis' omschreven worden als transmigranten met een meervoudige identiteit, die veel verder reikt dan hun dubbele nationaliteit.

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First off, I want to thank Bert Suykens, Bruno De Cordier, Aynul Islam, the Faculty of Conflict & Development and my fellow students for making the field trip to Bangladesh possible and memorable. Thank you for taking me to the city of Sylhet. There, I felt inspired to turn everything around that I had done up until that point for my dissertation, and start a new quest: the search for British Bangladeshi identity.

This thesis statement brought me to London. I have had the pleasure of renting a room in Mahmudur Rahman, Aisha Kirby, Shohef Sarang and Heidi Haiyue Hang's home. All of you are like family to me. Through my roommates, I have met many lovely people and I can honestly say that my research would not turn out the way it did without their support. I want to thank all my research participants for their cooperation and their honest and at times hilarious answers to the questions on my topic list.

I want to thank my parents for supporting me morally throughout my struggle to finish this dissertation, but also financially for helping out on my trip to Bangladesh and during my stay in London. It is because of you that I can chase my dreams, and for that, I could not be more grateful.

"When *are* you going to finish your thesis?" My friends have been asking me that same annoying question over and over again since I came back from London. It is because of you that I never had any doubts I would finish in time. Special thanks goes out to Annelien, Lien, Elise, Lothar, Jef, Joeri, Saskia and Wouter.

Two professors have helped me out enormously, and I want to end by thanking them. Marlies Casier has guided me when I was struggling with the concept of transnationalism. Also, she recommended a number of authors to me, not only academic literature but also fiction. Needless to say I cannot wait to start reading novels again. Bert Suykens, my thesis supervisor, also recommended a book and even lend it to me – you will get it back when I defend my thesis, I promise. But most of all, he had an infinite amount of advice, the kind that calms you down when you are full panic mode. He has guided me every step of the way and continuously challenged me in the process.

I am grateful to all of you.

Introduction

On April 13th, 2014, seventeen students from Ghent University attended a lecture at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet, Northeast Bangladesh, on transnational migration between that city and London. Professor Tulsi Kumar Das, who gave a keynote speech, talked about the demography, the history, the socioeconomic implications at home and abroad. Most interesting of all, he touched upon what it must be like to have a “twin identity” (Kumar Das 2014, 1): to be British and Bangladeshi at the same time.

The topic for this dissertation came about as a direct result of that enquiry. Students from Shahjalal University claimed to be “proud of their identity”, but mostly talked about how they wanted to move abroad, too. These students all had family outside Bangladesh. They wanted to follow in their footsteps by moving abroad to study at a prestigious university and hopefully find employment there.

With the history of Sylheti migration in mind (cf. *infra*), I, as a researcher, wanted to explore a different side to that story. My goal was to leave for the UK after my return from Bangladesh and get to know the ‘London point of view’. Acknowledging how much the idea (or ideal) of London had an effect on the lives of Sylheti youngsters, I decided I wanted to interview **young British Bangladeshis born and raised in London**, and **see to what extent their country of origin (still) affected their identity**. Put differently, I wanted to go explore the *Bidesh* (i.e. the foreign country), and find out to whether or not the word *Desh* (i.e. the home country, referring to migrants’ country of origin) holds any meaning for second generation British Bangladeshis, **and, if so, how these second generation migrants manifested that** part of their ‘twin identity’.

FROM DESHI TO BIDESHI:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BANGLADESHI MIGRATION TO THE UK

Throughout history, migration was seen – and, to the students of Shahjalal University, is still seen – as the sole method to achieve upward mobility (Kershen 1997b, 78). For that reason, in the 19th century, many Sylhetis¹ sought employment within the British India Company. The arrival of temporary migrants – seamen, also known as *lascars* – on the London docks was the starting point of the history of Bengali migration to the capital’s East End.

¹ According to Eade (1997), the sojourners that arrived in London were mainly composed of two ethnic backgrounds: Sylhetis and Punjabis.

The first Bengalis arrived in London around 1850 (Department of Communities and Local Government 2008, 6). These lascars envisioned the UK as the “[e]mpire and hope of employment” (Kershen 1997a, 4). To them, it represented “direct labour recruitment” (*ibid.*), which was facilitated by the country’s “open door policy towards immigrants” (*ibid.*). Their only goal was to be able to support their family (and community) upon return. In other words, most of these migrants had no intention of making a permanent move. Some of them ‘jumped ship’ in order to stay longer, but the majority of them wished to cash in as much as they could from their temporary employment, in order to return home a hero as soon as possible. As such, these men followed a typical pattern of *circular migration*.

During the post-World War II economic malaise, more sojourners were needed to alleviate the country’s labour shortages. That influx of migrants did not benefit racial tolerance in the UK. Shortly afterwards, the previous pattern of circular migration turned into *permanent residency* when the country’s ‘open door policy’ changed due to “heightened racial sensitivity” (Kershen 1997b, 79). Ironically, as a result, more migrants chose to stay, brought their next of kin over to London through family reunification, and slowly but surely abandoned the ‘myth of return’. More Sylhetis, if they had the right connections, were willing and able to take that plunge.

Today, Bangladesh is one of the Top 10 emigrant countries (World Bank 2011). In total, 0,5 percent of the British population has Bangladeshi roots (Kumar Das 2014, 3).

MIGRATION TRANSNATIONALISM:

CAUSE FOR CONTROVERSY AND (ACADEMIC) INTEREST

The post-war racial sensitivity Kershen points out is not exceptional to the late 1940s. Today, the whole of Europe is going through a migration crisis. Some might say it is one of the worst crises in history, as there are more migrants now than ever: with 1 in 122 people being either a refugee, an IDP or an asylum seeker, the number of displaced persons is higher than after World War II. As UNHCR stated in June, “[i]f this were the population of a country, it would be the world’s 24th biggest” (UNHCR 2015). Most of them migrated to find employment (ILO 2014).

From an academic point of view, it is also an exciting time to study migration, as, according to Vertovec (2009), “[m]any forms of migrant transnationalism and their related modes of transformation are likely to widen, intensify and accelerate” (Vertovec 2009, 161). Due to the ‘Information Age’ (Castells 1996) we live in today, transnationalism has overcome the boundary of space.

Transnationalism is defined as the “processes and activities that transcend international borders” (Bauböck 2008, 2), referring to the “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec 2009, i). Glick Schiller et al. (1994) describe it as follows:

The process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders. (Glick Schiller et al. 1994: 6; emphasis added)

Not all migrants are therefore transmigrants: only through continuing activities and actively maintaining relations to more than one nation can they be considered as such. For Portes (2003), the occasional visit to one’s country of origin does not suffice. The term hence constitutes a paradox: “transnationalism, as a new theoretical lens in the field of immigration, is grounded on the activities of only a minority of the members of this population” (Portes 2003, 877).

Consequently, according to Bauböck (2003), *migrant transnationalism* has to be seen as the creation of “overlapping memberships between territorially separated and independent polities” (Bauböck 2003, 700). As he explains,

Migration is basically an international phenomenon insofar as it involves a movement of persons between the territorial jurisdictions of independent states; it becomes transnational only when it creates overlapping memberships, rights and practices that reflect a simultaneous belonging of migrants to two different political communities. (Bauböck 2003, 705)

In other words, migrant transnationalism allows members who feel connected to more than one country – their country of origin and the country they live in – to express their ‘twin identity’ by creating and through actively acknowledging these multiple memberships. Now, more than ever, migrants have become closely aware of what is going on in their country of origin due to (increasingly fast) technological advances (Castells 1996). These include international news broadcasting, cheaper travel and telecommunications to keep in touch with family abroad (Vertovec 2009, 14-15). Also, migrant transnationalism has a profound influence on religious conduct and facilitates religious change (Vertovec 2009, 128).

BEYOND TWIN IDENTITY

SECOND GENERATION MIGRANTS' SENSE OF HOME

Migrant transnationalism does not only involve first generation migrants. From Vertovec's research, it became clear to the author that "even those who have never themselves moved from the home context are powerfully affected by events, values and practices among their transnationally connected relatives and co-villagers abroad" (Vertovec 2009, 15). This implies that second generation migrants remain connected to their roots through different things that remind them of their country of origin, like media (cf. Chapter 1), holidays and family (cf. Chapter 2), and religion (cf. Chapter 3).

This has implications for second generation migrants' sense of identity. Where exactly do they come from and where do they belong? Are we allowed more than one answer to these questions – in other words, more than one identity?

Identity, as we shall see, is a much contested concept in anthropology. As Barth stated in 1969, it classifies oneself, as well as the other, through boundaries. These boundaries are nonetheless dynamic. They allow individuals to negotiate their identity – to choose² it, as Martin claimed in 1995, and to construct a narrative to the individual's liking (cf. 1.1).

For migrants, that narrative can involve two nationalities, as Kumar Das had envisioned. However, it can be comprised of more elements than that. As Glick Schiller et al. (1992) put it, "[w]hile some migrants identify more with one society than the other, the majority seem to maintain *several* identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation" (Glick Schiller et al. 1992, 11; emphasis added).

Put differently, there is more to identity than only nation-states. In fact, transnationalism, as it is often argued, precedes nations (Vertovec 2009, 16-17). Following Martin's theory on narrative construction, we shall see that **history, space and culture** are important identity features, which we will explore in the first chapter. On top of that, through my research, it became clear to me that one's roots (enhanced by holidays and family) and one's religious beliefs (disconnected from these roots) also serve as crucial aspects. **Ethnicity and religion** will therefore each be explored in individual chapters.

² Barreto and Ellemers (2002) agree that individuals choose their identity, but question whether or not this choice is respected by others. External observers might ascribe identities upon migrants, for example based on the way they look. However, in this dissertation, the objective was to focus on the identity the participants chose to emphasize: their personal negotiation and the place of Bangladesh in that negotiation. The dissertation will therefore not include the perspective of external observation.

OBSERVATIONS AND COMPLICATIONS FROM THE FIELD

As identity, according to the literature, is heterogeneous, it is hard for a researcher to negotiate on these identities and find out exactly how the country of origin of my research participants is still part of that negotiation. Individuals will negotiate their own personal narrative that makes up their identity. As Riley (2008) states in his own introduction,

if really pushed, I would say that much more important to my sense of personal identity than [...] national and linguistic labels, are the facts that I was the first member of my family to go to university, that I am a lapsed Catholic and Chelsea supporter, and that I once was Corporal in charge of the squad which won the Coldstream Guards' Drill Shield.
(Riley 2008, 2)

This statement reflects upon the fact that, in the end, whatever ethnic roots and religious ideals migrants may have, or whatever language they may speak or which newspaper they may read, depends on the *negotiation* individuals have to determine the hierarchy of their identity – a negotiation which is prone to change.

In an attempt to find common ground, I opted for qualitative research, which implied that I needed to find a limited amount of participants and talk to them in-depth. I needed to engage with my research participants in order to really grasp their perceptions on the subject.

For that reason, after every theoretical part in each of the three chapters, I have included my 'observations from the field'. There, I present the elements that stood out in the participants' negotiation. I have included elements that I found lacking in connection or even worsening the idea these second generation migrants had of their country of origin, but I also wrote about the conscious or subconscious elements that brought them closer to 'home' – a phrase, as we will see, most migrants still used to refer to Bangladesh.

As Hannerz (1992) states, "[t]o study culture is to study ideas, experiences, feelings" (Hannerz 1992, 3). Finding out the personal hierarchies of 18 research participants made me excited to write about their thoughts and, ultimately, present to you this dissertation.

Methodology

This part focuses on the methodological strategy used in this dissertation. I start by defining qualitative research in general (including its level of reliability, validity and objectivity) and the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) in particular, and the reason why I have opted for this approach. Next, I want to explain the design and purpose of this research by listing the questions I wished to ask, clarifying what types of interviews I used to ask those questions and expressing their goal. Finally, I want to dwell on the process of data collection.

Not only will I explain the practicalities of my field research and theory, but also the choices I have made and the difficulties I have encountered along the way. One of the things taken into account when conducting qualitative research, is the researcher's train of thought. According to Flick (1998), reflexivity and communication can be included as an "explicit part of the knowledge production" (Flick 1998, 6) forthcoming from the research process. Therefore, I have divided the last subchapter into four different stages. I will delineate my research setting and disclose the reasons why I limited the age group of my participants to the ages 18-35. I wish to elaborate on the course of action I chose to partake and comment on my position as an outsider. In conclusion, I will share a number of difficulties along the way.

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

This dissertation is made out of qualitative research based on one month of fieldwork in the Autumn of 2014 (mid-October until mid-November), which enabled me to speak with eighteen British Bangladeshis in total. The second part of each chapter is hence based on the empirical data (cf. Annexes) I have collected: the views, ideas, experiences, personal opinions of these eighteen individuals between 18 and 35 years old.

Qualitative research is a method capable of capturing the context and complexity of phenomena (Flick 1998, 5) and hence accepts the diversity and plurality of subjective viewpoints of participants (Flick 1998, 6). It is an adequate method of research if the research objective is to "[explore] people's wider perceptions or everyday behaviour" (Silverman 1997, 12). Whereas quantitative research is based on "[t]heories and methods [that] are prior to the object of research" (Flick 1998, 41), qualitative assessment aspires "to discover the new and to develop empirically grounded theories" (Flick 1998, 5). Since my goal from the start has been to enquire after the research participants' broad and often complex views on British Bangladeshi identity and, by doing so, produce new data, I complied with qualitative theory.

RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND OBJECTIVITY

As this theory suggests, I spoke to my research participants on their own turf and on their own terms (Kirk and Miller 1986). I interviewed my research participants where they felt comfortable, in the language they feel comfortable in, about issues they have inside knowledge of. That way, I aspired to produce *reliable* data, i.e. empirical material that is “independent of accidental circumstances of the research” (Kirk and Miller 1986, 20).

As a researcher, it is important not to put pressure on participants or to try and get the answers you would expect or a priori presume to be true. Recording, transcribing and analysing these conversations implies that the basis of this dissertation research is interaction: the communication between research participants and researcher is crucial (Flick 1998, 6). In order to guarantee the *validity* of the interviews – to a certain degree (Kirk and Miller 1986, 21) – I had to keep an open mind at all times, moderate the conversation but intervene as little as possible, and observe as much as I could (Wolcott 1990, 127). The fact that all but one of my research participants did not mind I recorded the conversation, was very helpful in that sense.

To be able to interview in such a way, I needed to act naïve, “set aside [my] assumptions (pretensions, in some cases)” (Glesne 1999, 83) and keep in mind at all times that research participants will express different sentiments or ideas, since they represent their own subjective experiences. These diverse and subjective results, however, do not presuppose that qualitative research lacks in *objectivity*. Although one needs to recognize that “subjectivity is always a part of research” (Glesne 1999, 105), to produce objective data remains “the essential basis of all good research” (Kirk and Miller 1986, 20), and, as such, it can be defined as “the simultaneous realization of as much reliability and validity as possible” (*ibid.*). The eminence of qualitative research cannot be found in “prescribed formulas” (Buchanan 1992, 133) but it comes forth from “the power of its language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something about ourselves and our common humanity” (*ibid.*). Therefore, the objectivity of qualitative research is grounded in the empirical evidence (Kirk and Miller 1986; Flick 1998). As Flick (1998) states, texts are key: “they are not only the essential data on which findings are based, but also the basis of interpretations and the central medium for presenting and communicating findings” (Flick 1998, 29) and they are “used as a substitute for the reality under study in the further process” (Flick 1998, 30).

GROUNDED THEORY

Since the interpretation of the empirical material gathered in the field is crucial for the objectivity of the study, Grounded Theory Method (GTM) was established “to encourage researchers’ persistent interaction with their data” (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 1). Unlike

quantitative traditions³, GTM suggests that this acquired data should be the starting point of the research, not literature reviews or field enquiries that preceded the researcher's own observations in the field (Flick 1998, 41). The argument, as well as the concepts that support it, need to be "grounded" within the data, since they give rise to the theory" (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 14). In other words, theoretical concepts need to be derived from the empirical data itself, and in the process of data analysis, the researcher needs to keep "challenging concepts with fresh data" (Charmaz 2006, 9).

I myself did attempt to start a comprehensive overview of useful literature beforehand, which, in a strict sense, does not comply with GTM. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) suggest that, in GTM, "[d]ata collection and analysis proceed simultaneously and each informs and streamlines the other" (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 1). To construct an argument, I therefore relied solely on my transcribed records. Otherwise my own theoretical assumptions would have taken over and the research's objectivity would have been compromised.

When writing a literature review, however, I did not start over completely. Having begun by reviewing some existing literature is not unanimously considered a bad choice. Suddaby (2006) claims it is better to go into the field with a certain awareness of the literature than with a "blank sheet devoid of experience or knowledge" (Suddaby 2006, 634), as long as the data retains its pre-eminence. According to him, "[t]he reality of grounded theory research is always one of trying to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism" (Suddaby 2006, 635). This is exactly what this dissertation aspires to achieve.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PURPOSE

TOPIC LIST

One of the things I concocted before entering the field was the preparation of a topic list, i.e. a series of (mostly open) questions:

- Were you born here in London? Were your parents born here in London?
- Have you ever visited Bangladesh? What was your impression?
- Do you still have contact with the family members you visited?
- Do you keep up-to-date with what is happening there?
- If someone were to ask you, where are you from, what would your answer be?
- Do you still consider yourself Bangladeshi, being born here?

³ GTM is hardly ever associated with quantitative data, albeit that the founders of Grounded Theory did not refrain from mentioning it (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

- Do you know Bangla? Or Sylheti? Do you still speak it? *If you had children, would you teach them?*
- Are you proud of your heritage?
- Do you know the history of Bangladesh? *If you had children, would you teach them?*
- How important is your religion for your identity?
- Do you have other friends who have Bangladeshi roots?

Using these questions as the backbone of my research design, I have engaged in twelve interviews with a total of eighteen research participants. Especially follow-up questions concerning children were very useful in the sense that they gave me an insight into what was important for them to pass on.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

The number of participants (including research outsiders) that I interviewed at the same time, ranged from one to five. As such, I conducted both semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The interview styles are typical qualitative methods.

Semi-structured interviews are “well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Barribal and While 1994, 330). They are characterized by their (relative) openness (Flick 1998, 76), which inclines interviewees to explain their viewpoint more in detail and provides interviewers with the complex and diverse answer they were looking for.

Focus groups can be defined as “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger 1988, 18). They are particularly beneficial for research purposes since, instead of solely concentrating on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, they involve less moderation and more interaction among the participants themselves. Research participants’ ideas are triggered by the perceptions and experiences of others (Assema et al. 1992, 431), which stirs the conversation, and, as such, the result of the interview itself.

The most common and most convenient way (seven⁴ out of twelve interviews) was to get together with one research participant and interview him or her individually. In two out of twelve interviews⁵, I talked to two people at the same time. In both cases they were colleagues, so they knew each other quite well. Talking to acquaintances rather than strangers

⁴ Interview n° 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 12

⁵ Interview n° 1 and 2

is often seen as inappropriate in qualitative research (Morgan 1997; Flick 1998). Agar and MacDonald (1995) suggest that, if you are interviewing more than one person at once, it is better to talk to strangers. The argument used in favour of strangers is the probability that certain issues which are taken for granted by the participants would be left out more easily. However, since the topic of the interview clearly was not something participants consciously reflected about on a regular basis (cf. *infra*), my observation is that participants addressed issues explicitly at all times, whether I interviewed one person or addressed two (or five) participants simultaneously. On the contrary, I believe the conversation benefited from it, because even in groups of two the participants questioned each other's contrasting view. For example, when Papia⁶ stated she went to Bangladesh three times, Nasmin⁷ could hardly believe it⁸.

Assema et al. (1992) claim that focus groups should have between four (as a minimum) and twelve (as a maximum) participants. In interview 4, I asked direct questions to one person only but there were three other people present that influenced the conversation. However, I cannot call this a focus group, since only one person qualified as a research participant. Two other interviews⁹ had a higher number of research participants (all of them family members). Interview 11 nevertheless quickly turned into a one-on-one conversation again when two research participants needed to leave early, and can therefore not be defined as a focus group. Interview 10 included four research participants and one other person present that contributed to the conversation. As such, it is regarded as a focus group, albeit with a small number of participants, i.e. a mini-focus group (Krueger 1988, 28). To work with a small sample is logistically advantageous (*ibid.*). Also, it is "useful when the researcher desires a clear sense of each participant's reaction to a topic simply because they give each participant more time to talk" (Morgan 1997, 15). However, it does limit the results, as the researcher can only base his or her analysis on the experiences of the number of participants. When that number is rather limited, the experiences (and the depth of the research) will be, too (Krueger 1988, 93).

PARTICIPATION FORMS

Before starting my research, I planned to let my participants fill in and sign participation forms, stating their personal details (including important research criteria such as age and place of birth), a written consent for recording the interviews, which all but one (cf. Course of

⁶ Research participant n° 2

⁷ Research participant n° 1

⁸ Interview n° 1 (ii)

⁹ Interview n° 10 and 11

action in the field) of the participants verbally agreed to, and what they considered their core identity by including an exercise that asks them to rank ten possible features of their identity they connected most (1) or least (10) with. I used this exercise as another indicator of British Bangladeshi identity. Unfortunately, not all participants were inclined to fill in such a form: although they promised to do so, Ahmed, Naziyah, Tasnim, Nazmin, Nazmul, Hadi and Jacob did not comply. As a result, I refrained from using their full names in this dissertation.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

My immediate goal was to question British Bangladeshi Muslim identity. I wished to find out which part of that equation (British, Bangladeshi or Muslim) was superior to the others, whether or not these different ways of identification sometimes clashed and how identity influences the participants' everyday life in London.

DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

Before commencing my data collection and searching participants, I had pinpointed the following three criteria to work with: British citizens (1) born, raised and still residing in London (2) with Bangladeshi roots (3) between the ages of 18 and 35. In this subchapter, I want to dwell on the reasons why I chose these criteria, explain my course of action and elaborate on certain difficulties I faced.

RESEARCH SETTING

Rather than for example locating Bangladeshis in my own country, Belgium, I chose (East) London as my field research setting. I preferred it because of its historical (colonial) link and because I wanted to work within the place that has the largest concentration of Bangladeshi immigrants in this part of the world. I myself stayed in the E14-district, which is East London, between Whitechapel and Canary Wharf. Places where my interviews have taken place: Aldgate¹⁰, All Saints¹¹, Angel¹², Bow¹³, Canary Wharf¹⁴, South Quay¹⁵, Tottenham¹⁶ and Whitechapel¹⁷. Except for Angel and Tottenham, all of these places are in East London, just like about half of my interviewees (8 out of 18) were living in East London.

¹⁰ Research participants n° 6 and 7

¹¹ Research participant n° 10

¹² Research participants n° 1 (Interview 10), 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

¹³ Research participants n° 8 and 9

¹⁴ Research participant n° 5

¹⁵ Research participants n° 1 (Interview 1), 2, 3, 4

¹⁶ Research participant n° 18

¹⁷ Research participant n° 11

DETERMINING AGE BRACKETS

I have chosen the particular age group 18-35 as the profile of my respondents because I wanted to interview young adults, who were still studying or just starting their careers, to match the age group of the students of the Shahjalal University I spoke to in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

This, however, is not the only reason I opted for those particular age brackets. To me, they form an interesting group because they are at a certain point in their life they need to make decisions that will affect the course of their future, whether these choices are professional or have to do with studies or marriage. These young adults are at a crossroads where they explore and/or question certain issues, whether it be old habits (cf. Ahmed¹⁸), religion (cf. Ahmed¹⁹, Salma²⁰ and Kolsuma²¹), professional ambitions (cf. Kolsuma²²), relationships (cf. Afchana²³), parenthood (cf. Nazmin²⁴ and her family), or identity (cf. all).

Since I myself am also on a similar crossroads in life, the choice seemed obvious. In order to relate to my research participants, even as an outsider (cf. *infra*), I believe common ground is an appropriate base for diving into personal backgrounds and questions of identity. Being on the verge of similar challenges gave me a starting point for conducting an interview. Since it was not always easy to find research participants in such a short amount of time (cf. *infra*), I believe engaging with an age group similar to myself has helped me convince the eighteen individuals I interviewed of my research and why I wanted to meet up with them. Another contributing factor to that common ground, for sure, was the fact that I myself travelled to Bangladesh in the Spring of 2014.

COURSE OF ACTION IN THE FIELD

In the course of this field research, I have interviewed the following types of British Bangladeshis:

- I. British Bangladeshi research participants who were born in London and are still living there
- II. British Bangladeshi research outsiders who were born in Britain, spent their (entire) childhood in Bangladesh and are now living in London

¹⁸ Research participant n° 10

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Research participant n° 6

²¹ Research participant n° 7

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Research participant n° 8

²⁴ Research participant n° 12

III. British Bangladeshi research outsiders who were born in Bangladesh and are now living in London

During my stay in London, I have tried to get in touch with such residents by (1) renting a room in a shared flat with, among others, a Bangladeshi man who has moved here from Dhaka eight years ago, (2) getting in touch and meeting up via social media, such as the Couch Surfing website, (3) emailing and eventually visiting local organizations and participating in their events (e.g. Brick Lane Circle²⁵) in the hope they would get me in touch with British Bangladeshis and (4) relying on my initial contacts hoping they would get me in touch with more people who met these criteria. This last step is also known as *snowball sampling*. It increases the number of participants with inside knowledge through referrals (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 141). As such, it is a particularly important step, as it has helped me get in touch with possible research participants that I would have not found through the internet. Indeed, the first three steps either would not have been possible or would have been much more difficult and/or time-consuming without online resources. Therefore, the snowball-aspect of my research was the most important as well as the most unpredictable part about my stay in the British capital. For that reason, I've included the way I met up with these research participants in the annexes, so that it is made clear how I was able to make these appointments.

In order to meet my criteria and respond to my thesis statement, the last two types of residents matter much less than the first, since they (if they are between the ages of 18 and 35) constitute the core respondents I had been looking for. I nonetheless spoke to a lot of residents who can be described as (II) or (III), especially in the initial phase of my research, for they referred me to people who did match the criteria that my research question describes²⁶. However, these interviews can also be seen as *piloting*, since I gained a lot of information from each of my initial participants. It was helpful talking to them, not only because of their network, but also to "refine approaches and questions where necessary" (Department of Communities and Local Government 2008, 16). For me, it was a "chance to inform [myself] about the topic itself" (Glesne 1999, 38), which gave me an indication of where my research would eventually take me.

In the course of one month, I spoke with eighteen British Bangladeshis between the age of 18 and 35 whose parents were born in Bangladesh, also known as second generation migrants.

²⁵ Cf. Research participant n° 18

²⁶ Cf. Annex II

I met all of them in person²⁷. I carefully taped each of these conversations, except for one lady who did not care for being recorded – in her case, I wrote everything down as meticulously as possible. For the other seventeen participants, I transcribed the data according to no particular transcription guidelines; however, I tried to be consistent in the way I presented the interviews and copied everything literally.

OUTSIDER VERSUS INSIDER STATUS

In the course of my research, I have been honoured with positive feedback from various interviewees. One participant declared what a “good job” I was doing: “I think you’re doing a great job, you know. This should be us. You know what I’m saying, this should be us talking about our country to other people.”²⁸ Although I was very happy to receive that compliment, I am not sure whether I completely agree with him. I myself embarked upon my research and engaged in conversation from an outsider’s perspective.

Engaging in field research as an insider has certain benefits. During the second week of my stay in London, I attended a lecture by Fatima Rajina, a SOAS-scholar who is also working on British Bangladeshi identity. As an insider, she claims that “[her] participants shared information they would never have shared with a non-Bengali” (Rajina 2014). On the other hand, her research has been criticized severely exactly because of her insider status. Questions were raised about the objectivity of her findings: her lack of detachment, being a British Bangladeshi Muslim herself, could compromise the results. As such, there are cases to be made both in favour of an inside position as well as in favour of an outside position. I myself entered this research field as a complete outsider: non-Bengali, non-British and non-Muslim. Rabe (2003) claims that “[o]ne of the major advantages of being an outsider is quite clearly that you look at things with ‘new’ eyes and therefore notice things that insiders take for granted or do not notice” (Rabe 2003, 157).

Kikumura (1998) believes the difference between insider and outsider research fundamentally lies with the advantage of empathy and insight versus the benefit of scientific detachment. Insider and outsider statuses are, however, hardly fixed: just like identity (cf. Chapter 1), those statuses are not absolute, but fluid (Rabe 2003, 150). Both the fact that I have already visited Bangladesh and I only interviewed people from the same age group as me (cf. supra), did grant me some empathy and insight without formally claiming an insider’s position. Additionally, to a certain degree, I engaged in what some (e.g. Glesne 1999) would call “going native”: I immersed in East London culture by living with a Bangladeshi immigrant.

²⁷ As it turns out, this was a really good thing. That way, I was able to ask questions and draw conclusions from why all but one female research participants wore their hijab (cf. 3.5).

²⁸ Interview 11 (lxxvii)

This gave me a better understanding of multicultural East London life in general and of my research subject in particular. In other words, I believe I still maintained my scientific detachment, but, in a way, I felt equipped with some of the benefits insiders have.

DIFFICULTIES IN FINDING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Regardless of the common ground elements listed above, it was not always easy to encounter research participants that matched all criteria. Despite the claim that “[fieldwork] is fun; it is easy; anyone can do it” (Punch 2014: 93), at times, it was not convenient at all. Snowball sampling, as I previously stated, is unpredictable: in the field, I had to depend on other people to gain contact information of other possible participants. This is especially difficult to oversee when conducting qualitative research, since in-depth interviews require a certain amount of closeness between interviewer and interviewee (Flick 1998, 54). For that reason, most researchers choose to stay longer in the field (*ibid.*). One month is a short period of time to network within a society and, because of that dependency, there were days on which I had zero interviews, and days on which I had five or six participants to talk to²⁹.

Even when I acquired contacts that appeared to match the criteria, the interview did not proceed as planned. A man I interviewed, called Assan³⁰, had told me in our first conversation that his family background was Sylheti, but when we met up, he told me that he was originally Assamese. This sort of misunderstanding happened more than once. Some of the people I interviewed turned out not to have been born in London, or even Britain, after all. Lepina³¹ was not the only person I addressed throughout Bengali History Week. When I met up with a contact, Ahmed³², it became clear that, even though I had updated him on the criteria before our appointment, he was born back in Bangladesh. When Nasmin³³ invited me to her home to talk with her siblings and sisters-in-law, none of them realized until it became a clear subject matter that the elder sister present, Jabin³⁴, was not born there at all. Jabin even literally said she was born in England, and only when her sister denied it, she realized it³⁵. Both cases are very interesting, since they imply that, if you live most of your life in Britain and you identify

²⁹ On 22/10/2014, I talked to five different participants (interviews 1, 2 and 3) and on 10/11/2014, two days before I went back to Belgium, I spoke to eight people in total (interviews 10 and 11), six of which were new research participants who matched the criteria.

³⁰ Research outsider n° xvi

³¹ Research participant n° 18

³² Research outsider n° xii

³³ Research participant n° 1

³⁴ Research outsider n° xvii

³⁵ Interview n° 10 (lviii)

with this country more than anything (cf. Jabin stating “Yeah, we are British.” earlier on in the conversation³⁶), you appear to literally neglect the place you were born.

Another contact, Zohar³⁷, was born in England and lived in London, but only moved here to study and was actually born in Manchester. This only became clear at the end of the conversation. The records of that interview unfortunately cannot benefit the research and are therefore not included in the first annex. The student did provide me with some insight as to why it was difficult to find research participants. He told me it could either be because of my gender or the subject I was investigating. According to him, being a woman was at my disadvantage, because (so he declared) religious men were not allowed to talk to a (single) woman, especially not if she were alone, especially if she is not wearing a hijab. A second reason he presented me with was far more curious. He claimed the subject of my research was of little interest to other second generation British Bangladeshi, because, since they were brought up in the UK, the idea of “Bangladesh” and the identification with their roots had become unappealing to them. This is an interesting idea, as it seems to imply that the people I got a hold of and did interview were a priori interested in and convinced of the importance of research on identity. It is certainly something to keep in mind while interpreting the data I gathered from the people who were willing to participate.

³⁶ Interview n° 10 (lvii)

³⁷ Research outsider n° xv

CHAPTER I: IDENTITY

*Even if I haven't got any feelings for the country,
I still consider myself a Bangladeshi, in London, in Britain.*

Kolsuma Begum (xxiii)

IDENTITY

--- Theory

In order to give a correct representation of the sense of identity of second generation British Bangladeshi migrants living in London, it is vital to first gain a knowledgeable understanding of what ‘identity’ exactly entails. Its importance cannot be overstated, as Castells (1996) claims:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. [...] People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. (Castells 1996, 3).

However, the term is not without controversy. Martin (1995) criticizes the way in which the notion is too often used, which made it lose its analytical force. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) also have their doubts about the resonance of the concept, as identity: “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1).

Instead of offering an explanation to researchers, first and foremost the concept requires an explanation of its own (Malešević 2002, as cited in Karner 2007, 2). As such, a theoretical framework on identity is needed, before elaborating on the particulars of second generation British Bangladeshi migrants in relation to their country of origin.

In this chapter, we will first see what the term ‘identity’ exactly means, why it is seen as a ‘dynamic’ concept rather than a static one, and why it requires a ‘negotiation’ **(1.1)**. Furthermore, we will focus on Martin’s vision on identity and elaborately treat the different aspects of the narrative he claims identity entails: history **(1.2)**, space **(1.3)**, and culture **(1.4)**. Language is seen as an important part of culture. Through my research it became apparent that it is one of the main features from which there is a clear connection to the participants’ country of origin. Therefore, I chose to expand on the topic **(1.5)**, before turning to the results from the field.

1.1 NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Barth (1969) specifies identity as the method through which one is able to classify oneself and ‘the other’. As such, individuals are able to achieve a form of social allocation through means of confined ethnic (cf. Chapter 2) categories, which function as an “organizational vessel” (Barth

[1969] 1998, 14). This process is based on the notion of interaction. Barth's theory points out the importance of *negotiation* in order to be able to create and maintain identities based on social boundaries. Barth exemplifies this by using the metaphor of "osmosis" (Barth [1969] 1998, 21): similar to identity, this biological concept implies boundaries that are not impermeable, but negotiable. Henceforth, 'identity' is a dynamic concept.

Eade et al. (2006) apply a comparable view about the fluidity of identities and the importance of switching between different identities. They also point out the "ability to negotiate" (Eade et al. 2006, 2) and the "[great] diversity of identities" (*ibid.*). Gardner (1995) agrees as she discusses the necessity to "negotiate [...] countervailing and at times oppositional forces" (Gardner 1995, 4) to construct one's identity both socially and economically.

Individuals might not value one aspect of their identity as much as the next. Through negotiation, they create hierarchy. As Snauwaert et al. state, "some of these memberships will be more important for [them] than others and consequently [they] will identify with them more strongly" (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 2). Put differently, individuals are able to reflect on their own identity, structure features of their identity according to a hierarchy they can choose themselves, dependent of the particular situation they find themselves in at the time. As such, this hierarchy can change over time.

Although he is concerned about the analytical force of the term 'identity', Martin shares these views. The author supports the idea of an "open-ended identity" (Martin 1995, 8). According to his interpretation, identity functions as a kind of *narrative*, wherein narrators have the ability or the aptitude to alter the plot as they wish, and, as such, are capable of reinventing their own identity.

As identity is envisioned as part of an open-ended story, it will as such always be "the result of a choice" (Martin 1995, 14). The author therefore depicts identity as something heterogeneous, which is based on freedom of choice. Narrators can, in other words, manually determine their own identity, in accordance with the aspects they choose to focus on. This way, it would be no exception to achieve "multiple identification" (Martin 1995, 14), i.e. the creation of an identity which contains several layers.

To construct such a narrative, as Martin suggests, three fundamental postulates must be considered: one's relationship to the past, one's relationship to space, and, ultimately, one's relationship to culture (Martin 1995, 12-13). These postulates illustrate three important aspects that were part of the negotiation the participants used to envision their identity and the part that Bangladesh plays in it. Therefore, following GTM, Martin's theory serves as one of the main academic frameworks this dissertation is grounded on.

1.2 HISTORY

The first postulate indicates the importance of historical roots in order to acquire an identity, in which violence acclaims a crucial role (Martin 1995, 12). Processes of past traumatic experiences or past conflicts (and the shared grief as a result of that conflict) have a profound effect on one's attitude in the present: they can strengthen the bond between different members of a community, or do quite the opposite.

Martin's first postulate suggests that past tension and trauma in Bangladesh could serve as the catalyst for communal interconnectedness. Migration usually involves tension and it can be a highly traumatic experience. Most Bangladeshis, however, decided to migrate for economic purposes: their *choice* to migrate was a positive development, as it implied upward mobility (cf. Introduction). Rather, past experiences that can be defined as traumatic include the violent climax of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 and, eventually, the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Instances of political violence from the recent past – the post-election uproar of 2014, for example – could also be seen as potential triggers, as this reveals the country's corrupt politics.

Through (international) media, migrants can stay informed about such instances of political violence. In this day and age, it becomes much easier to stay up-to-date on various issues through various types of media because of the evolution in technology and, more in particular, telecommunications. According to Castells (1996), networks brought about by this evolution continue to gain importance. In his view, the information technology revolution that has started off this 'Information Age' (Castells 1996, 40) has transformed and even transcended space. This brings us to our following postulate.

1.3 SPACE

The spatial aspect, which links locality to historical roots, is Martin's second postulate. According to him, it is crucial in the sense that it affects power relationships: one can claim to have more right to a certain location than others (Martin 1995, 12). The destinations migrants are drawn to, are not random (Sowell 1996, 5). They will migrate to places that they know, or feel connected to (Winter 2015, 22). Rather than nations, the destinations migrants really choose, are cities (Bauböck 2003, 707). Sometimes, these destinations can be as specific as the neighbourhood level (Sowell 1996, 6). British Bangladeshis might be drawn to Brick Lane because of the large number of curry restaurants, but Sylheti migrants may feel they have more right to live in East London because of their historical link (cf. Introduction).

Sylheti households tend to "transcend geographical boundaries" (Gardner 1995, 5): the way they live their life is "no longer conventionally bounded or determined by space" (*ibid.*). Their choice

to migrate has connected different worlds and intertwined different cultures, which has been referred to by Vertovec (cf. Introduction) as migrant transnationalism.

According to Barth (1994), “more and more people become conscious that the entire world is our arena” (Barth 1994, 28). Networks with others can be seen as the basis of such space-transcending, transnational connections (Castells 1996, 413). As Vertovec (2009) states, “[a]n increasingly significant channel for the flow of cultural phenomena and the transformation of identity is through global media and communications” (Vertovec 2009, 7).

Transnationalism therefore helps people communicate across different cultures without taking the boundary of space into account. It can be seen as “a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national *narratives* they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified” (Vertovec 2009, 3; emphasis added). The telecommunication which fortifies this, functions as “a kind of social glue” (Vertovec 2009, 56).

In other words, through transnationalism, space – or the lack thereof – can be seen as something which intensifies culture instead of disregarding it. The space between *deshis* and *bideshis* that has been transcended through media and telecommunication therefore becomes a part of their cultural narrative.

Living in a city fortifies this experience. As Castells states, “[t]he global city is not a place, but a process” (Castells 1996, 386). Historically, cities are linked to migration, and, for that reason, today, they are much more diverse than the countryside could ever be (Winter 2015, 7). Consequently, city mentality is liberating: as its inhabitants are accustomed to diversity, they tend to leave others alone and will therefore be less judgmental of foreign faces (Van Straaten 2012, 40-41).

1.4 CULTURE

Finally, Martin reflects on cultural interconnectedness. Specific cultural traits of certain ethnicities or nationalities can be emphasized, or disregarded. That way, they become part of the group’s identity. Culture, after all, can be defined as “the knowledge members of a society need if they are to participate competently in the various situations and activities life puts in their way” (Riley 2008, 36). The importance of language, but also the choice of food and style, can be seen as cultural features that pre-exist and can be “transformed into emblems of identity” (Martin 1995, 13) dependent on the situation.

Culture, then, should not be seen as absolute. According to Alexander and Kim (2013), identity consists of “an alternative story” (Alexander and Kim 2013, 352), that opposes the idea of “cultural absolutism” (*ibid.*).

The concept of culture has been criticized because it focuses too much on homogeneity (Brumann 1999, as cited in Clycq 2010, 17). According to Brumann, the concept is going through a crisis: it draws too much attention to “shared patterns at the expense of processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions” (Rosaldo 1989, 28). Critics view culture as the story of individual agency, which implies variability and inconsistencies, conflict and change (Brumann 1999, S1). Following this tradition, Karner (2007) states that “‘cultures’ do not constitute self-contained universes that fully determine who an individual is” (Karner 2007, 73). Like Martin said, cultural phenomena are either intensified or neglected: they do not determine who the individual is or limit his or her options, because the individual still has the right to negotiate his or her identity.

According to Alexander and Kim, identities are crystallized within “specific and often *local* historical, geographical, social, cultural and political spaces” (Alexander and Kim 2013, 351). The authors do not see it as a separate universe, but they envision a “shifting, partial and contingent construction of identity – of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’” (Alexander and Kim 2013, 352). Karner (2007) agrees, as he states the following:

[C]onstant ‘identity talk’ is juxtaposed to many people’s everyday lives that are shaped by several ‘cultures’ (to introduce another ubiquitous and equally ill-fitting term): none of us is just one thing, belongs to just one group and has just one identity; and yet we are constantly surrounded by a language that emphasizes being, belonging and having. (Karner 2007, 2)

Put differently, scholars need to move away from absolutist conceptions of identity and accept the heterogeneous nature of the process. Only when it is recognized as a dynamic process, cultural identity can truly become a story: a narrative in which second generation migrants can choose to call themselves British, Bangladeshi, a mixture of both aspects of their (twin) identity or a combination with other layers they deem important, which they can reinvent as they go along.

1.5 LANGUAGE

Language is an especially important cultural feature, as it is central to this construction of identity (Lleshi 2010, 184). Following Herder (1772), Riley (2008) states the following:

language is at one and the same time the tool, the contents and the form of human thought, and every act of knowledge is only possible through the medium of language. This

interdependence means that the modes of thought and the culture of a people can only be studied and analysed in and through their language. (Riley 2008, 9; emphasis added)

Language, then, is an expression of a culture, but also an expression of the self. As Chambers (1994) claims, “[l]anguage is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted” (Chambers [1994] 2005, 22).

If or when second generation migrants lose their ‘mother tongue’, this evolution would then imply the loss of their *original culture* (Lleshi 2010, 184). Children of immigrants are more likely to be fast learners of the language of their *new culture* and, in the process, they are also more likely to slowly but steadily lose fluency when speaking the language of their country of origin: “[w]ithout concerted effort by both parents and children, the vocabulary and literacy level of the language of origin usually lags far behind that of the new language” (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002, 74). The fact that first generation immigrants, unlike their children, for the most part continue to speak their mother tongue, sometimes leads to miscommunication (*ibid.*).

However, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco’s research (2002) on children of (in their case, Spanish-speaking) immigrants in the United States leads to the following result:

Valuing English, however, did not mean abandoning one’s language of origin: 90 percent of children indicated that maintaining their first language was also important to them. (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002, 52)

This implies that adopting a new language (or new languages), from their new culture, and slowly losing their language of origin, from their country of origin, does not necessarily mean that they lose all interest in their ‘mother tongue’.

As we have seen, most British Bangladeshi are of Sylheti descent (cf. Introduction). Therefore, the most widely spoken variety of Bangla in Britain is, in fact, Sylheti (Department of Communities and Local Government 2008, 44). Often, however, second generation British Bangladeshis do not only speak English and Bangla, but also Arabic, as that is part of their upbringing as Muslims (Zeitlyn 2008, 126).

As Zeitlyn states, “[d]iaspora groups inevitably learn new languages and are often bilingual to varying degrees” (*ibid.*). Being bilingual or even trilingual gives British Bangladeshis the opportunity to negotiate their identity through their language: by either speaking their mother tongue or not, they show the outside world whether their language of origin (and therefore also their country of origin) is, indeed, still important to them, in order to be a part of their narrative.

IDENTITY

Observations from the field

Using the previous part as a starting point to structure the results of my field research, I now want to either ratify the theory on identity, or oppose the scholars' view by taking examples from the field.

I will start off with evaluating the disapproval that academic researchers such as Martin and Brubaker and Cooper have for the (use of the) concept 'identity' (1.6). Next, I will elaborate on Martin's view of the concept, showing how and why it truly is a choice (1.7) and investigating the importance of his three narrative postulates (1.8) – history, space, and culture; and, derived from those, information and language – for the participants' connection to their country of origin.

1.6 IDENTITY AS SUBCONSCIOUS

First, I would like to point out that my research shows that the criticism that scholars such as Martin have for the term 'identity' is just. Even though I chose it as one of the main focuses of my dissertation, I myself found out during my field research that not many British Bangladeshis feel at odds with their identity. On the contrary, asking the questions on my topic list (cf. Methodology) brought home the reality that 'identity' is not something many participants actively reflect upon.

Only one participant claimed he actively reflects on his identity: **Nazmul (research participant n° 15)** says "always consciously aware of where [he] come[s] from"³⁸. All the others, however, are not. **Ruman Ahmed (research participant n° 5)**, for example, clearly states he "[does not] think [he debates] in [his] mind too much what [he is]"³⁹. Or, as **Naziyah (research participant n° 14)** claims, "[she does not] even know what Bangladeshi is"⁴⁰. Living in as large, cosmopolitan and diverse a city (cf. 1.3) as London, they do not feel confronted with their identity. As **Afchana Begum (research participant n° 8)** states, "in one face there'd be like five different-- like about ten thousand cultures"⁴¹.

When they are confronted with concrete questions about their identity, they feel apologetic about the fact that they do not think about what it means to be a second generation British Bangladeshi.

³⁸ Interview 11 (lxxii)

³⁹ Interview 3 (x)

⁴⁰ Interview 10 (lvii)

⁴¹ Interview 6 (xxx)

Already in the beginning of our interview **Nasmin Ali (research participant n° 1)** said “I have no sort of connection to Bangladesh, I know that is bad”⁴². **Salma Begum (research participant n° 6)** felt very guilty about not knowing a lot about Bangladesh, on which her friend and colleague **Ferjana (research outsider n° xiii)** called her out by stating “[l]iterally she’s Bangladeshi but she doesn’t know anything about it”⁴³. **Kolsuma Begum (research participant n° 7)**, even feels selfish because of her lack of emotions towards her country of origin⁴⁴.

Some participants even wanted to cut the interview short or not do it at all: they were afraid that their views on their identity would not suffice, since it is not something conscious for them. Repeatedly, **Salma** said “[d]on’t know nothing, sorry”⁴⁵ and even claimed “[m]aybe you should’ve asked someone else to do this [interview]”⁴⁶. **Jamshid Alam (research participant n° 9)** asked me the same question, as he “hardly [knows] anything about Bangladesh”⁴⁷. The way in which **Jacob (research participant n° 16)** stated “[he hadn’t] got a lot to say”⁴⁸ in comparison to his brother **Nazmul**, who is more interested in and more vocal about the subject, is in this regard also very significant.

On the other hand, there were participants that, although they did not actively reflect on their identity, they did actively applaud the research I was doing. **Hadi (research participant n° 17)** even declared (cf. Methodology) that they should be the ones talking about it⁴⁹ (cf. Methodology). He seems aware he has different identities, and he thinks he should pay more attention to it. Yet, Hadi also felt insecure during the focus group and promptly left to leave his brother-in-law to do all the talking. This implies he is not consciously dealing with the subject after all.

As such, it is fair to state that identity is something which is subconscious; it is juxtaposed to everyday life (cf. Karner 2007). Although there is so much academic debate going on about the concept, individuals hardly find the time or feel the need to question their identity in their day to day lives.

1.7 IDENTITY AS A CHOICE

When Martin states that identity results from a choice, he does not imply that identity is a strict selection between one aspect of your identity and the other. Instead, Martin indicates that individuals have a free choice, that can be reevaluated and adapted at any given time. Hence,

⁴² Interview 1 (ii)

⁴³ Interview 4 (xxi)

⁴⁴ Interview 5 (xxiii)

⁴⁵ Interview 4 (xix)

⁴⁶ Interview 4 (xxi)

⁴⁷ Interview 7 (xxxi)

⁴⁸ Interview 11 (lxxii)

⁴⁹ Interview 11(lxxvii)

migrants do not need to choose between their roots and their (new) home when asked to elaborate on their identity. **Afchana** described her identity as “British born Bengali, I have Bengali culture in me, but I’m religiously Muslim born in a western society”⁵⁰.

The views of my participants have sometimes changed over time, which reinforces the idea that identity is dynamic and dependent on particular situations. **Kolsuma** had a hard time with her Bangladeshi roots. Now, she feels differently, stating: “A couple of years back, I was really unhappy with my name and so on. I think now, I’ve come to terms with that. I think I’ve matured a little”⁵¹.

To the question “*If people were to ask you, ‘where are you from?’, what would you say?*”, **Nazir Hossein (research participant n° 11)** replied:

Well, I classify myself as a British Bangladeshi so if anyone did ask me, “where are you from?” ... Well, it depends, if it was an older, say, Bangladeshi uncle for instance who came to visit... A lot of his cousins, they ask me, “where are you from?”, “From London.” That’s where I was born and raised there. My roots are from Bangladesh, but that’s where my Mum and Dad were born. So when they go on and ask, where are your parents from, then I would say, “From Bangladesh.” Then, they will ask, “So, you’re from Bangladesh?”, I’d be, “No, I’m from London, but my parents are from back home.”⁵²

For **Lepina Begum (research participant n° 18)**, it changed over time: as she works in a very international place, “everyone is always from somewhere else, so they always want to know, ‘Where are you really from?’ in a way”⁵³. **Ruman** replied that “[he thinks] there’s an answer for each different situation. It depends on what they want to know, whether or not they want to know where you grew up or what your genetic background is”⁵⁴. He has learned this from experience: “I know people asking me questions could mean different things”⁵⁵.

What Nazir, Lepina and Ruman indicate here, is the fact that the (re)negotiation of your identity is possible every step of the way – depending on whom is enquiring and how you want to present yourself to that person. This confirms that identity results from a choice, which is made through interaction with others and prone to change.

1.8 NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Martin talks about negotiating one’s identity in terms of constructing a narrative, for which he presented us with three important postulates: history (cf. 1.2), space (cf. 1.3), and culture (cf. 1.4 and, by extension, 1.5). In this subchapter, I compare the postulates to my observations in the

⁵⁰ Interview 6 (xxvi)

⁵¹ Interview 5 (xxiii)

⁵² Interview 9 (lxi)

⁵³ Interview 12 (lxxxii-lxxxiii)

⁵⁴ Interview 3 (x)

⁵⁵ (*ibid.*)

field. Derived from these main postulates, I will also consider communication, media, and language.

1.8.1 HISTORY

During my time in the field, I often turned to history as an indicator of whether or not second generation British Bangladeshis were still interested in their country of origin. Many participants claimed to know “nothing” (cf. Salma Begum in 1.6). During our conversation, **Kolsuma** came to the realization that “what [her] dad taught [her] as a kid [about Bangladeshi history], [she] just realized that [she does] the same with [her] nephew, but [she teaches] him the history of England”⁵⁶.

Some research participants got their history mixed up, like **Rummel Allah (research participant n° 4)**, who thinks that Bangladesh “has only been formed for like 30 or so years, 35 years”⁵⁷. Others feel as if they do not know much, only “bits and bobs”⁵⁸, like **Ahmed (research participant n° 10)**, who states he does not know “too many, like, sides of my country, yeah, ‘cause I don’t go through there, I just know my Sylhet, and my village”⁵⁹. To Ahmed, local history is as important as national history. However, he does feel he wants his children – if he has any – to know all the history of Bangladesh, even though he claims he knows hardly anything about it.⁶⁰

It is clear that not all research participants share the same ideas about the subject. **Shafi Hassan (research participant n° 3)** claimed “all the history” was “quite important to him”⁶¹. **Lepina** feels the same way, which is not surprising, however, as I first met her at a Bengali History Week event. **Nazir** claimed he did learn about history and, when he saw history up close during a visit to his country of origin (cf. 2.2.1), he found it very interesting:

*When I went back home on holiday, I went to a few monumental sets, I’ve been to the War Museum, I visited a few places, talked about places. I think one of them was, erm... I forgot the name, but they got a miniature version in Altab Ali Park.*⁶²

Nasmin referred to the same monument while pointing it out to her sister-in-law **Tasnim (research participant n° 13)**, and confessing she herself does not know what it stands for:

Nasmin: You don’t even, you know that monument, like where the people died in Bangladesh, they don’t understand what that is.

⁵⁶ Interview 5 (xxiv)

⁵⁷ Interview 2 (vii)

⁵⁸ Interview 8 (xxxvii)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Interview 8 (xxxviii)

⁶¹ Interview 2 (vi)

⁶² Interview 9 (xlii)

Tasnim: Oh yeah, I've been there. Yeah.

*Nasmin: I've seen the memorials but I don't know what they stand for, that's really bad.*⁶³

In order to determine whether my research participants are still interested in the country's history, I frequently referred to the monument (a replica of the Language Movement monuments that you can find in every large city in Bangladesh) in Altab Ali Park, in East London, when I passed there with a research participant – which are, unfortunately, off the record moments. Their answers gave me a good indication whether they kept that sense of history alive or not: about half of them had hardly noticed the monument before or did not know its meaning until I, as an outsider (cf. Methodology), explained its meaning to them. This means that subconsciously, they still care about the history, but they do not see it as something which is “relevant to [their] lives anymore”⁶⁴.

1.8.2 SPACE

Knowing that historical links between Bangladesh – or, more specifically, Sylhet – and East London (cf. Introduction) are important enough to place a miniature version of the Language Movement Monument, it is crucial for this research to analyse which participants lived there, which did not, which would never live there, and which thought they would never live there but eventually ended up there:

Salma: I used to say that before I got married, never in my life [strong emphasis] I would get with someone that's from East! And move down to East. But things turned. Now I ended up living down here. In Banglatown. He he he.

*Ferjana: Ha ha ha. Not the Banglatown, the Sylhetitown!*⁶⁵

As it turns out, second generation British Bangladeshi's relation to space is not as straightforward as I originally thought. Only half of the participants resided in 'Banglatown' (cf. Methodology). **Salma** told me it took her a long time “to actually settle down in this area”⁶⁶ since, according to her and **Ferjana**, the people in East London are very judgemental (cf. 3.5). For people who grew up in the area, this might be different. **Ruman** grew up there and made friends that influenced him: “My mates in general think of Bengal as their country. We grew up in large Bengali communities here. They tend to have that shared concern [about Bangladeshi politics].”⁶⁷ **Nasmin** tells us how her husband has a similar experience⁶⁸. Contrarily, **Kolsuma** did not have Bengali friends growing up and does not want to be associated with other people only speaking Bengali to one another⁶⁹. **Jamshid** tells us he is “a bit of both”: he has both Bengali and non-Bengali friends

⁶³ Interview 10 (xvii)

⁶⁴ Interview 5 (xxiii)

⁶⁵ Interview 4 (xv)

⁶⁶ Interview 4 (xvi)

⁶⁷ Interview 3 (xi)

⁶⁸ Interview 1 (iii)

⁶⁹ Interview 5 (xxiv)

and “tend to focus on here rather than back home [...] ’cause, you know, what’s, what’re we gonna gain from knowing what’s happening back home?”⁷⁰ Jamshid’s testimony holds the middle ground between Ruman’s and Kolsuma’s, as he is not really interested but still refers to Bangladesh as “back home”, whereas Kolsuma calls London “home”⁷¹.

There is a reason why in this dissertation, I refrain from using the word ‘home’ and rather stick to ‘country of origin’. In the interviews, I also tried to use ‘home’ as little as possible – I wouldn’t use it if a participant hadn’t used the phrase himself. This makes it interesting to see which participants use the expression ‘(back) home’ for Bangladesh and which use it to refer to London or the UK. As it turns out, 11 out of 18 research participants⁷² started talking about home, referring to Bangladesh, even if they expressed not to feel attached to their country of origin⁷³.

I heard research participants contradict themselves multiple times. **Nazir** stated he is from London, but his parents are from back home⁷⁴. In the beginning of our interview, **Rummel** says “back home”, but later on he states “When I think of home, I don’t think of Bangladesh – my home is here in the UK [...] I wouldn’t say ‘home’ but I would say ‘roots’.”⁷⁵

Ahmed, who is from East London and, like Jamshid, has mixed friends, sums it up as follows: “Obviously, I ain’t born in my, in my parents’ country but end of the day it’s our country as well.”⁷⁶ Calling Bangladesh ‘home’ proves that, to him – and to other participants who said the same thing – the connection is still significantly, but subconsciously, there.

From analysing the PARTICIPATION FORMS, it becomes clear that, consciously, rather than Bangladesh, **London** is seen as the participants’ home: all participants gave it a high score, and **Lepina** even put London before her religion (cf. 3.6). The only exception is **Nazir**, who favours the borough (East London/Tower Hamlets) he lives and works to the city itself. The reason why **East London** is less favoured by the other participants, is because not all of them live there or were born there.

In choosing between *their country of origin* and *the country they were born in*, there was some debate among the participants’ written answers. One participant, **Ruman**, feels his Bengali roots are more important than his connection to the UK or England. **Papia Begum (research participant n° 2)** and **Shafi** write down both as equally important. The other seven participants

⁷⁰ Interview 7 (xxxiii)

⁷¹ Interview 5 (xxiii)

⁷² Rummel, Ruman, Salma, Afchana, Jamshid, Ahmed, Nazir, Jamshid, Nazmin, Nasmin, and Nazmul

⁷³ Out of these eleven participants, Rummel, Ruman, Salma, Afchana, Jamshid, Nazmin and Nasmin all expressed how they do not feel connected to Bangladesh or its culture.

⁷⁴ Interview 9 (xli)

⁷⁵ Interview 2 (v-vi)

⁷⁶ Interview 8 (xxxv)

who filled in the participation forms explicitly prefer the UK to Bangladesh. As **Rummel** claims, “[w]hen I think of home, I don’t think of Bangladesh – my home is here in the UK”⁷⁷. But, as **Afchana** states, “British culture is not really a focused culture, there’s not much to it”⁷⁸. For that reason, she prefers East London, in all its diversity, over the UK.

1.8.3 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Due to the advancements in telecommunication (cf. Castells 1996), it has become easier for British Bangladeshis to remain connected through relatives that they might still have in Bangladesh. In this subchapter, we will see how telecommunication and media, both important elements of the information technology revolution that Castells pointed out to, affects them. In other words, we will find out whether literally calling home to Bangladesh says as much about the participants as calling Bangladesh ‘home’.

Like no other before, this generation is experiencing the Information Age to the fullest. Having a closer look at their thoughts on *telecommunication*, however, it becomes clear that second generation migrants make less *phone calls* than their parents would, or they themselves are less inclined to take the initiative. **Nazmin (research participant n° 12)** testifies that “[i]f you can, you kind of avoid talking to them. It’s, you know, it’s people you don’t know”⁷⁹. When second generation migrants do come to the phone they sometimes find they have nothing to say, as **Afchana** states that “occasionally, they do make a phone call here and there, they do say, “how are you?”, “how’s life?” -- it’s general, a two minute conversation”⁸⁰. Not all participants feel that way, however. Although she claims she tries to avoid the family in her country of origin, **Nazmin** does use *alternative media* (WhatsApp) to remain in touch with her cousins⁸¹.

What most of them do agree on, however, is the fact that they do not keep informed on what is happening in Bangladesh through those *phone calls*. Receiving *news* from back in Bangladesh is of little interest to most second generation migrants. **Nasmin**, for example, claims, “[she doesn’t] talk to [her relatives] about Bangladesh, that’s mostly [her] mum”⁸².

Some, however, stay more or less up-to-date. When they do, they would not turn to phone calls, but they would keep informed through *alternative media*. Social media (Facebook, in **Ahmed’s** case⁸³) are sometimes used to convey news and ideas about Bangladesh with friends and relatives from the participants’ country of origin. As **Ruman** said, “I do try and stay up-to-date – I probably

⁷⁷ Interview 2 (v)

⁷⁸ Interview 6 (xxix)

⁷⁹ Interview 10 (lvii)

⁸⁰ Interview 6 (xxvi)

⁸¹ Interview 10 (lvi)

⁸² Interview 1 (iii)

⁸³ Interview 8 (xxxvi)

won't use the same medium that they do, but I do keep track of what is happening in general"⁸⁴. The media referred to here, are the so-called *Bangla channels*: television channels in Britain that offer a variety of items that appeal to Bangladeshi migrants, in their language of origin. Some second generation British Bangladeshis watch them, but only because their parents put those channels on. As **Nazir** states,

If something was happening in Dhaka, would you hear about it too?

Erm. My mum, she always watches Bangladeshi TV channels. She watches the news. On my day off, when I spend time with her, having ginger tea or a cup of coffee, I watch it with her. I keep myself, you know, once a week, twice a month perhaps I sit down to watch the Bangladeshi news. I'm roughly up-to-date. I mean, I'm more up-to-date with what's happening back home with my family members than the actual news itself.

By yourself, you wouldn't put on those television channels?

*No. I'm more for watching sports or a movie, not, not Bangladeshi channels.*⁸⁵

Once second generation migrants move out of their parents' house, they do not continue watching those channels. As **Salma** claims,

Salma: [...] My dad, he watches the, erm, Bangla channel. Yeah. But I don't. We don't have it in my home.

But you used to, at home with your parents?

*Salma: Yeah, at home, when my dad used to watch it, like, just sit there, and just watch. But I'm not interested. Maybe because I'm from here and... I'm not that interested.*⁸⁶

The lesser connection is not the only reason why Bangla channels do not appeal to second generation migrants. Another problem occurs with the television shows that are broadcasted through those channels, and it has to do with language – a broad issue that I will devote the next subchapter to. Sticking to communication and media in this subchapter, I will however already say that no less than three participants⁸⁷ voiced the problems they have with the language TV-journalists use that work for the Bangla channels. As **Papia** and **Nasmin** state,

Papia: I guess it has to do with our dialect, the thing is that we don't understand. Do you understand, Nasmin?

*Nasmin: We speak Sylheti. I can't understand a word they're saying.*⁸⁸

Language is not only an issue with Bangla channels. Another classic medium, namely the *Bangla newspapers* that are distributed in East London⁸⁹, also experiences difficulty attaining readership among second generation migrants, because a lot of them do not know how to read their language of origin anymore (cf. 1.8.4).

⁸⁴ Interview 3 (x)

⁸⁵ Interview 9 (xl)

⁸⁶ Interview 4 (xviii)

⁸⁷ Nasmin (and her family as well), Papia, and Rummel

⁸⁸ Interview 1 (iii)

⁸⁹ Often, these are handed out on prayer day in the East London Mosque.

Also, it is considered not the most reliable source for information about Bangladesh. **Ahmed** and **Nazir** both complain about that lack of reliability: they claim those newspapers include false information⁹⁰ and often, the news they present is exaggerated⁹¹. On a similar note, **Nazmul** is concerned with the political agenda that those newspapers have, as he says that “[with English or international newspapers, which he prefers], you can read the subtext; with Bangladeshi newspapers, you can’t do that”⁹².

Whether second generation migrants stay informed through classic or alternative media (or not at all) is a very relevant question to this debate. Another interesting observation, nonetheless, is the fact that when they do keep up or hear news, it makes the idea they have of their country of origin worse for them. Keeping up with political events, for example, by no means enhances a connection with their country of origin, as Bangladeshi politics has a negative connotation. **Papia** stays away from that sort of news because “[i]t’s all corrupt”⁹³. **Kolsuma** states “it was once mentioned on telly, the world’s most corrupt country is Bangladesh, [...] [she doesn’t] want to be attached to that”⁹⁴. **Afchana** states that incidents in Bangladesh, like the collapse of Rana Plaza, “doesn’t give Bengalis a good name, that gives them a worse name”⁹⁵.

It seems that, unlike Vertovec’s research and Castells’ theory, my time in the field makes it clear that the importance and maintenance of transnational networks through media and telecommunication are not very strong in the case of my research participants. Second generation British Bangladeshis appear less interested in phone calls and they hardly keep up with the news. When they do receive a call from Bangladesh, overall, the conversations are rather superficial and short. Not very often do they involve news that would keep the migrants up-to-date on what is going on in Bangladesh. When they do hear news, they are likely to have acquired it through alternative (social) media rather than classic media. Also, it is likely to be negative, which makes their desire to maintain a connection weaker.

1.8.4 CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Culture can mean something different for everyone. To **Afchana**, for example, Bengali culture is all about *marriage*: “get married when you’re young and have kids”⁹⁶. For **Shafi**, culture has to do with *history* (cf. 1.8.1) and *family* (cf. 2.4)⁹⁷. For **Nazmul**, it means a lot of things, *not being allowed*

⁹⁰ Interview 8 (xxxvi)

⁹¹ Interview 9 (xl)

⁹² Interview 11 (lxxv)

⁹³ Interview 1 (iii)

⁹⁴ Interview 5 (xxiii)

⁹⁵ Interview 6 (xxvii)

⁹⁶ Interview 6 (xxvi)

⁹⁷ Interview 2 (vi)

to be left-handed being one of them⁹⁸. To Tasnim Miah, culture means *traditions*: she admits she follows hardly any, besides the language, except “maybe some, like, food”⁹⁹.

From hearing this, it is clear that culture is indeed not a self-contained universe, as Karner (cf. 1.4) suggested. Therefore, we will now go into what *language* means to the research participants, as this was brought up by most of them as an important cultural feature. Subsequently, we will learn what participants really think about their heritage and whether or not they think their relation to Bangladeshi culture will start fading soon.

Academic literature suggests that language is central to identity: it expresses both one’s self and one’s culture (cf. 1.5). Therefore, it was no surprise so many research participants found it very important to express who they are and where they came from. To be able to speak (and continue speaking) a language equals to maintain a certain closeness. As **Ruman** stated, he “[thinks] that the kind of key to any culture is the language”¹⁰⁰.

Most of the participants I spoke to (17 out of 18), came from Sylhet. They do not speak the standard variety of Bangla: their language – or dialect, as some authors would state – is also called Sylheti. **Afchana** exemplifies the difference between Bangla and Sylheti as such:

*I am Sylheti. I speak, like, basically, East London and they speak, erm... Queen. He he. If you want to put it in that sense. Like, they speak posh and we speak, you know, slang language. So that’s where it comes from and yeah, basically... The difference.*¹⁰¹

However, not all participants know Bangla (or its Sylheti dialect) as well as they would like. A large number of them do not know or hardly know how to read and write the language. **Salma** talks about how she does not know it very well: she cannot read it and if she speaks to her family in her country of origin, there is always some kind of miscommunication¹⁰². She tells her cousins “oh forget it”¹⁰³ when such communication problems occur. However, she still feels very strongly about her ‘mother tongue’, as she calls it, and she wants to pass it on to her children: “I don’t want them thinking, because they are brought up in this country, I don’t want them to think they’re English. I want them to know where they are from, because I’m from there”¹⁰⁴.

⁹⁸ Interview 11 (lxxviii)

⁹⁹ Interview 10 (xvii)

¹⁰⁰ Interview 3 (x)

¹⁰¹ Interview 6 (xxviii)

¹⁰² Interview 4 (xvii-xviii)

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Interview 4 (xx-xxi)

This outlook on language is shared by almost everyone¹⁰⁵. **Ahmed** even stated that he would teach it to his children as their first language, because it was his own first language¹⁰⁶. In the Khatun family, Sylheti was also their first language. However, they think **Nazmin**'s new-born baby is "gonna learn English, isn't he, 'cause that's what we're all speakin'"¹⁰⁷, even though they want to teach him his language of origin, too, as Nazmin states "it's something I would like to equip him with... I love my country"¹⁰⁸.

Nazmin even plans to "equip [her son] with as much, you know, as [she] can"¹⁰⁹. To her, this implies a plan of teaching him three to four languages when he's still young: English (as a first language), Bangla (the Sylheti dialect her family speaks), Arabic and either Spanish or Mandarin. By turning him into a polyglot (cf. Zeitlyn 2008), Nazmin's son will be able to express his identity in multiple languages, like **Afchana**, who speaks five languages – three of which fluently¹¹⁰.

Nazmin does emphasize the fact that she will need to teach her son his second language *consciously*¹¹¹, as it is not a given that this will go easy. Above all, she does not want the tradition to die out, and she wants her son to be able to speak to his family in his country of origin¹¹². However, it becomes harder and harder to keep the language tradition alive. Even now, the older sisters already make fun of the way the younger speak their language of origin¹¹³.

Other participants testify to that fact. **Kolsuma**, **Ahmed**, **Lepina** and **Nazir** also talk about how their brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, cousins, and children of friends hardly know any Bangla anymore. **Ahmed** has reconciled with it:

[N]owadays, kids are learning more English than Bengali. Like my mates' kids, they're learning more English than their own language. But that's how it is.

How do you feel about that?

*It's nothing to feel... At the end of the day, that's it, kids. [I]t's just, erm, obvious, our own people, they don't know English. Not much well. If old people speak to them, they will understand less. That's what it is. But it's nothing, it's not a major something.*¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁵ Only Jamshid (xxxii) said that if he'd married a non-Asian, he might not teach it to his children.

¹⁰⁶ Interview 8 (xxxviii)

¹⁰⁷ Interview 10 (xliii)

¹⁰⁸ Interview 10 (xliv)

¹⁰⁹ Interview 10 (xlv)

¹¹⁰ Interview 6 (xxvii)

¹¹¹ Interview 10 (xliii)

¹¹² Interview 10 (li)

¹¹³ Especially Naziyah, who is the youngest of seven, knows old-fashioned Bengali words because she works in East-London and is teased because of it. But, then again, the Khatun family also laugh at the way their parents pronounce certain English words, and, in turn, their in-laws mock their pronunciation of Bangla.

Interview 10 (xliii-li)

¹¹⁴ Interview 8 (xxxviii)

Kolsuma considers this a normal development: “I think it is important to get a balance of both, but I think the balance is still more English-focused”¹¹⁵. **Lepina** thinks it is “a bit of a shame and a big loss in that sense”¹¹⁶, and would turn to extraordinary measures to teach her children: “I’d probably have to bring in some professional help”¹¹⁷. **Nazir** has to convince his little brother to speak Bengali. To him, it seems important, as it is part of his heritage:

So, English is your first language, you weren’t raised in Bengali?

My mother taught me to speak Bengali at home, but it’s... When I’m speaking to my mum, it’s Bengali, with my little brother it’s English. I’m having to force my little brother to speak Bengali, ‘cause even with Mum, he speaks English. And his Bengali isn’t as good as mine or my Mum’s is.

Why do you find it important to point that out to him?

*It’s your, you know, it’s your culture, it’s your heritage. You will... Okay, fair enough, you were born in London, be British, but your roots, your mother tongue, it’s Bangladesh. Bengali is, you know, that’s... Bangla is your language, it’s your mother’s tongue, so it’s important that you should know it.*¹¹⁸

Ahmed, Kolsuma, Lepina and Nazir are not the only ones who fear that the following generations will have difficulty maintaining the language. Some even question whether culture in general has an expiration date. **Rummel** “personally [thinks] culture will start fading”¹¹⁹:

*Because we’re more engrossed here in the UK, so if we have children, their roots are going to be in the UK as well. As the years go, as the generations go, I think it’s going to be faded.*¹²⁰

His friend and colleague **Shafi** feels the same way¹²¹. **Nazmul** says to give it “another two generations, and then it’d almost certainly be wiped out”¹²². **Naziyah** thinks this development will be especially difficult for first generation British Bangladeshis: “I just think that, when I have kids, it’s gonna be much more difficult for mum and dad, because if we get married, they’re gonna talk like us, speak like us, they’d be thinking, ‘oh the Bengali culture just keeps decreasing’ ...”¹²³. Her attitude testifies to the fact that most research participants¹²⁴ remain proud of where they come from. As **Lepina** states,

*Everyone’s born in a certain place, with a certain ethnicity, where you come from. So I think it’s good to be proud of where you’re from. And even, we don’t revive it a lot, in terms of heritage. But the more you learn about traditions, I think it’s good to... be happy where you’re from. In a way.*¹²⁵

To Lepina, that feeling of being proud is connected to her ethnicity.

¹¹⁵ Interview 5 (xxiii)

¹¹⁶ Interview 12 (lxxxiii)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Interview 9 (xli-xlii)

¹¹⁹ Interview 2 (vi)

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Interview 11 (lxxvii)

¹²³ Interview 10 (l)

¹²⁴ I asked the question literally to Ruman, Ahmed, Nazir and Lepina, and all of them responded positively.

¹²⁵ Interview 12 (lxxxiii; emphasis added)

What stood out to me when interviewing my participants, was the way in which some of them preferred to be referred to as 'Bengali' rather than Bangladeshi. Moreover, all of them identified with Islam before anything else. Therefore, it seems that ethnicity and religion are two important features of the participants' identities.

To further elaborate on the identity of second generation British Bangladeshis, I wanted to explore those aspects that have gained such a high position in the participants' hierarchies. Therefore, the following two chapters are devoted to the link between identity and ethnicity on the one hand, and the link between identity, ethnicity and religion on the other. Also, more than I did in this first chapter, I shall elaborate on the differences between first generation and second generation migrants – both in the theoretical overview and in the parts where I uncover my field research results.

CHAPTER II:

ETHNICITY

*I think sometimes, even though I'm not always entirely aware of what is happening,
it's like a natural instinct that takes us back to our roots.*

Shafi Hasan (vii)

ETHNICITY

--- Theory

In this chapter, the concept of ethnicity – in relation to identity – is central to the debate. To start this discussion, there is another element that has been and remains crucial to my dissertation's argument: the historical and cultural links which support, strengthen and sustain identity. Individuals value history as it provides them with a “rich representation” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 7) of their identity and the cultural expectations that coincide with this identity, i.e. “how they should behave and [how they differ from other groups]” (*ibid.*). This takes them back to their roots.

Ethnic groups are described as “a type of social organization in which the participants themselves make use of certain traits from their past” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 2). Barth ([1969] 1998) defines this as such:

[A] population which:

- 1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating*
- 2. shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms*
- 3. makes up a field of communication and interaction*
- 4. has membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category indistinguishable from other categories of the same order.*

(Barth [1969] 1998, 10-11)

Ethnicity, then, is seen as a “recurring, more or less widely shared set of ideas, a framework for making sense of the world [...], a way of seeing the past, the present and the future” (Karner 2007, 33).

As Castells (1996) pointed out, in the present, we are living “in a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, [where] people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national” (Castells 1996, 3). In Isaacs' (1975) and Clycq's (2010) view, the basic feature of such a primary identity is ethnicity. Their ideas on ‘basic identity’ and ‘basic group identity’ will be the starting point from which this chapter will explore ethnicity **(2.1)**.

To elaborate on this, we need to take a closer look at the particulars of second generation migrants and the way their ethnic identity is manifested according to the theory **(2.2)**. Elements such as roots, soil, holidays, gifts, remittances and family are seen as important to help them maintain this

sense of ethnic identity (2.2.1). However, being second generation migrants, and therefore not truly being migrants, will also put them in the position of being caught in between two societies (2.2.2): the country their parents originated from and the country they themselves were born. We will learn what coping mechanisms academic research from the past has presented, before looking into my own observations from the field.

2.1 BASIC IDENTITY AND BASIC GROUP IDENTITY

While identity – as seen in the first chapter – is often multi-layered, individuals have the tendency to rely on their basic identity for support (Clycq 2010, 34). According to Clycq (2010), these identities are often based on ethnic roots.

Through emphasizing their ethnic identity, individuals find “psychological security, a feeling of belonging” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 2). They use visual ‘ethnic markers’ to indicate their membership to a particular ethnic group (McElreath et al. 2003, 122), similar to how Martin (cf. 1.4) called specific cultural traits “emblems of identity” (Martin 1995, 13).

This does not imply that the ethnic factor is the only element to be reckoned with, as “each individual belongs to several social units at once” (*ibid.*). Nor does it mean that ethnicity is the only *important* element, as basic identities depend on context and identity in itself remains complex. However, it does imply that ethnicity is frequently considered a basis, from which other layers of one’s identity develop, which, in turn, influence each other (Clycq 2010, 34-35). As Horowitz (1985) states, “ethnic identity typically embraces multiple levels or tiers, so that it is possible for an individual to claim more than one identity” (Horowitz 1985, 65).

Prior to Clycq, Isaacs (1975) also considered ethnicity as the primordial sense of identity:

An individual belongs to his basic group in the deepest and most literal sense that here he is not alone, which is what all but a very few human beings most fear to be. [...] It is an identity he might want to abandon, but it is the identity that no one can take away from him. (Isaacs 1975, 35)

Isaacs described the concept of ‘basic group identity’ as a ready-made sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Isaacs 1975, 30-31). To him, that “belongingness” is the primary source of self-esteem.

In Isaacs’ opinion, a basic group identity is an “identity made up of what a person is born with or acquires at birth” (Isaacs 1975, 30). This does not mean that identity is fully dependent on a group, as groups can be fragmented (Isaacs 1975, 30). It therefore serves as the basis from which “the individual ego identity” (Isaacs 1975, 32) can be negotiated. Horowitz (1975) agrees, stating that

“[g]roup identities are in flux” (Horowitz 1975, 112) and “there are possibilities for changing individual identity” (Horowitz 1975, 113).

Put differently, while both Isaacs and Horowitz acknowledge the importance of a group’s past, they also recognize the fragmentation of that group as a “present pervasive condition” (Isaacs 1975, 30). This leads them to believe that the identity of a group invades an individual’s sense of identity. Therefore, in his view, the theory behind basic group identities does not imply the homogeneity of those groups. On the contrary, ethnicity also welcomes fragmentation and heterogeneity. And, since “[n]o group’s culture is static or unidimensional” (Song 2003, 42), it is also possible to negotiate one’s ethnic identity in interaction with others (*ibid.*).

Especially in mixed societies – where multiple ethnic groups live alongside or together with one another, and secondary sources of self-esteem come into play – individuals have to cope with “the uncertainty of belonging” (Lewin 1948, as cited in Isaacs 1975, 35). According to Lewin, “it is not the belonging to many groups that is the source of difficulty, for we all belong to different groups, but the uncertainty of [it]” (Lewin 1948, as cited in Bergmann 1995, 251). Regardless of how many generations migrants have lived in a certain country, they will still be perceived as different: they obtain the stigma of “eternal otherness” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 26). Kristeva (1990) nonetheless advocates the opportunity that people have if only they realize they treat others as such:

The awareness of the complex and constructed nature of our identities offers a key that opens us up to other possibilities: to recognise in our story other stories, to discover in the apparent completeness of the modern individual the incoherence, the estrangement, the gap opened up by the stranger, that subverts it and forces us to acknowledge the question: the stranger in ourselves. (Kristeva 1990, as cited in Chambers [1994] 2005, 25)

As Roosens (1994) states, “[e]thnicity can stress division and opposition in mankind, but not necessarily” (Roosens 1994, 101).

2.2 FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION ETHNICITY

First generation migrants actively cherish their ethnic roots. According to Snauwaert et al., “[t]he hearts of these immigrants never left their home country” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 11). By stating this, the authors mean that in most cases, migrants still keep alive ‘the myth of return’ (cf. Introduction) – even though they almost never do return – and they refrain from comparing themselves with the people from their new home, as they continue to look up to the behaviour and the values of people from their country of origin (*ibid.*).

As such, first generation migrants focus on “[t]he feeling of continuity with the past” (Roosens 1994, 100). Their spiritual and emotional home will always remain their country of origin. They

see their new country of residence as “a promised land in terms economic opportunity and material advancement” (Eade 1997, 105-106). Settling was never truly on their minds (Gardner 1995, 46). Or, as Roosens (1994) explains,

they [see] themselves as people who [want] to make as much money in the shortest time possible in order to return home, where they would figure as successful middle class region in their region and family of origin. (Roosens 1994, 96)

For **second generation migrants**, it is a completely different story. For them, the promised land is “more elusive” (Eade 1997, 106) as they could envision it in both their country of origin and their country of birth – both materially and spiritually (*ibid.*). Indeed, the offspring of first generation migrants are “caught in a vacuum between two cultures” (Kershen 1997b, 85).

2.2.1 ROOTS, SOIL AND FAMILY

These migrants, according to Clycq (cf. 2.1), will therefore turn to ethnicity as their basic identity. Following Roosens (1994), migrants feel so drawn to their origins because of the “genealogical dimension” (Roosens 1994, 83), i.e. the “kinship or **family** metaphor” (*ibid.*). As Snauwaert et al. explain, “belonging to an ethnic group is like being rooted in a family” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 2-3). Fenton (2003) agrees, stating that ethnic groups “bear strong family resemblances” (Fenton 2003, 8). As such, these family relations are “vital and instrumental” (Roosens 1994, 88).

Living abroad, migrants are expected to exchange **gifts** (Gardner 1995, 122-123) or send **remittances** (Gardner 1995, 123-124) to their country of origin. This reinforces social relationships with their kin (Gardner 1995, 122¹²⁶).

Even though relations with family are somewhat blurred or even “heavily diluted” (Roosens 1994, 97), and cannot “provide the only experiential base from which identity is forged” (Barth 1994, 15), family still often remains an important tie that binds second generation migrants to their country of origin. It sometimes helps them to continue identifying with where they originally come from. However, this implies that these participants might not only be “affected by their parents’ nostalgia but also by their families’ enduring transnational connections” (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2002, 169).

Another link that might remain, is the fact that sometimes, first generation migrants still have acres of **land** (taken care of by family members or members of the household) in Bangladesh, and they would take their children there to see it and preserve it. The “soil of the *desh*” (Gardner 1995, 66) – which often has a spiritual significance (Gardner 1995, 75) – helps both generations to

¹²⁶ Gardner’s research claims that remittances and gifts also produce political and economic power relationships, and enforces a spiritual dimension, but since I have mainly focused on maintaining a sense of belonging through social relationships and not through political leverage, I shall not go into this any further.

identify with their country of origin, as they “are intimately connected to local social and economic reproduction” (Gardner 1995, 66).

First generation migrants, who are still envisioning their return, traditionally take their children on long **holidays** to their country of origin. Sometimes, these trips last for several months in a row, and they get to know that country and the culture their parent(s) grew up in. These trips are contrasted with the perception most second generation migrants have on their future. Mostly they envision their future in their country of birth, not their country of origin, and they express that feeling rather “assertively” (Roosens 1994, 97). In their case,

‘home’ is not associated with an eventual return to the country of origin. At the same time, they are aware of the ways in which their identification with a ‘homeland’ has been shaped [...] They move between various worlds and homes [...] The placing of home has become more complicated. (Eade 1997, 101-103)

Hence, second generation migrants do not possess a uniform or unanimous opinion of home: to them, ‘home’ is a heterogeneous concept, and, as we have seen (cf. 1.8.2), most of the participants still use it to refer to their country of origin, even when they claim to hardly feel a connection with that society, since it has become ‘foreign’ to them.

2.2.2 IN BETWEEN SOCIETIES

Not only do they perceive their ‘home’ as ‘foreign’; often, second generation migrants are treated like foreigners when they visit their country of origin (Leman 1998, as cited in Snauwaert et al. 1999, 12). As Safran (1991) puts it, “there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially” (Safran 1991, 91).

However, in the country they were born, they are often treated the same way. As Marx (2006) states, “[h]ard as they might try, they are never fully accepted by the old-timers” (Marx 2006, 103). As such, they are “[r]ootless” (Krieger-Krynicky 1988, 123): they are “uneasily positioned between [two] societies” (*ibid.*), caught in a “state of permanent exile, where nowhere is truly home” (Gardner 1995, 5) and therefore bound to have “multiple, co-existing identities” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990: 17).

Having being born in a country different from their country of origin, second generation migrants are, in fact, not immigrants (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 12), but often they are labeled as such (Roosens 1994, 97). Mainly because of stereotyping, they are “treated as ethnic and thus as second-class [citizens]” (Marx 2006, 104). As Roosens (1989) states,

They feel that they are not fully accepted by the dominant society. At the same time they come to see the lifestyle and values of their parents as dated and backward. (Roosens 1989, as stated in Snauwaert et al. 1999, 12)

In order to deal with this dichotomy, Leman (1982) suggests the idea of the ‘second migration’ as a coping mechanism: often, second generation migrants return to their roots – their basic identity (cf. 2.1) – “as a source of a positive social identity” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 17). Marx agrees, stating that “[a] very effective and empowering response to ethnic labelling is for the immigrants to make a virtue out of necessity, and to become once again ethnic” (Marx 2006, 104). It can be seen as a “source of solace” (Portes 2003, 880) to become involved in transnational activities because of it.

Returning on one’s ethnicity for solace or relying on a transnational network does not literally mean that these migrants return home. However, it does imply that they will (visually) express their different identity, and, as such, actively create social borders (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 13). This practice is called *ethnogenesis* (Roosens 1989). According to Barth (1994), however, religion is often part of this awakening of second generations’ roots. He claims that Muslims especially refer to their religion when reflecting upon their identity. We will elaborate on this in the next chapter.

ETHNICITY

Observations from the field

In the theoretical part of this chapter, we have defined ethnicity and explained its importance. As we have seen (cf. Introduction), transnationalism precedes nations. Some research participants believe that ethnicity, too, is prior to nationality. They actively question the term *British Bangladeshi*, as they see *Bengal(i)* as their roots, “tribe or race”¹²⁷, whereas *Bangladesh(i)* is – according to **Salma** for example – “just a country”¹²⁸.

As **Ruman** states, “borders can change in time, but your race is not going to change”¹²⁹. For that reason, in his PARTICIPATION FORM, Ruman strongly preferred Bengal (2) over Bangladesh (9). **Nazir** also wrote down his preference to Bengal (1 as opposed to 10). The relation between identity and ethnicity and the way migrants manifest their ethnic identity, is therefore a valid question for this research paper and it can be seen as the reason why I chose to incorporate this chapter in the first place.

Therefore, in this subchapter, we will look into the features that serves as the manifestations of ethnicity: gifts and remittances (2.3), soil (2.3), family (2.4) and holidays (2.5). Ultimately, we will come back to the idea of basic (group) identity, redefining it by means of the observations from the field (2.6). This is important to find out whether or not a return to ethnicity can indeed serve as a coping mechanism.

2.3 SOIL, GIFTS AND REMITTANCES

Awareness of one’s roots can imply an emotional link – through family for example (cf. *infra*) – to one’s country of origin, but it can also mean a more materialistic relationship. For that reason, I would like to start off this debate by looking into the land some migrants still maintain in the *desh*, and the valuable things they send back to where they came from.

Talking about **remittances** is one thing that I did not engage in. As a short-term researcher, only visiting London for one month, I only had one conversation with each participant, except for Nasmin, who was involved in two interviews¹³⁰, and Salma, whom I met again on a social

¹²⁷ Interview 3 (x)

¹²⁸ Interview 4 (xxi)

¹²⁹ Interview 3 (xi)

¹³⁰ Interview 1 and interview 10

occasion¹³¹. But even they might have taken it the wrong way if I would have started talking about money, so I refrained from bringing up the subject to anyone.

With one participant, however, I did have the opportunity to hear about the *gifts* he exchanges with his family abroad: **Nazir** explains that “with [his] younger cousins [telephone conversations] would be about, ‘Can [he] send[s] them this toy?’, they want a Barcelona football T-shirt, they want this...”¹³². This testimony implies that there is a certain level of expectation: as their cousin is living abroad, he must have more money, and he must have the ability to send gifts. However, Nazir works twelve hours a day, so it is hard to meet these expectations.

To still have *soil* in Bangladesh can be seen as a more positive link to migrants’ roots. Three participants talked about how their family still owns land in Bangladesh. On the one hand, there’s **Ruman**, whose family preserves a piece of land: he asks about it during telephone conversations, but according to him those inquiries stay general¹³³. On the other hand, there’s **Jamshid**, who stays up-to-date because of it: “sometimes, we are still up-to-date with what is happening back home, we own a couple of properties back home, so we are updated on how it is, what’s going on, stuff like that”¹³⁴.

Ahmed’s father still owns his father’s house, and for their family, this is the reason why they keep visiting their country of origin often¹³⁵. Also, Ahmed strongly prefers the village to the city¹³⁶. **Nazmul** does not speak of owning land, but he does recall a feeling from when he visited his country of origin (cf. 2.5):

*you don’t yearn to live there, but when you’re there, you feel like, “this is where we should be,” do you know what I mean? But that, I suppose, comes from the fact that, you know, you see the fields where your parents worked on. My dad, where he used to work, and where my grandfather is buried, and things like that. So you, you have genuine connections to those bits of land, and in geographical terms, that’s where, you know, it resonates with you a lot.*¹³⁷

Soil, then, is indeed something which can bring them back to their roots. It links them both to their history as well as to their culture. Whether they own that piece of land or not, is not always important: seeing with their own eyes can be enough to have a connection, especially if they also connect it to the family they had or still have.

¹³¹ Cf. picture on page 1

¹³² Interview 9 (xxxix-xl)

¹³³ Interview 3 (ix)

¹³⁴ Interview 7 (xxxii)

¹³⁵ Interview 8 (xxxiv)

¹³⁶ Interview 8 (xxxvii)

¹³⁷ Interview 11 (lxx)

2.4 THE KINSHIP METAPHOR

Roosens' kinship or family metaphor implies much more than a materialistic link: it signifies that migrants' ethnic roots are validated through contact with their family members. A lot of research participants speak very highly about their family members. **Afchana** cannot stop talking about them, and **Ahmed** would not want to work for anyone else besides family. When raving about their families, however, most of the participants refer to their family who live abroad, just like them. This does not make the connection they have with Bangladesh necessarily strong.

It seems evident that there is a big gap between participants that still have a lot of family in Bangladesh and those who do not. Most of **Nasmin**'s family lives outside of Bangladesh, she tells me immediately after explaining she hardly feels a connection¹³⁸. **Papia** has a different perspective than her colleague:

*I feel as if I've got a connection there. Most of my mum's side is still there. So like her brothers and sisters, and their kids. All of my first cousins are still there. Yeah, I would consider myself British Bangladeshi.*¹³⁹

Like Nasmin, **Rummel**'s and **Shafi**'s kin also live abroad. Rummel's grandparents are the only ones who still live in the *Desh*¹⁴⁰ and he does not feel connected either. Shafi, however, still feels connected. So the gap does not apply to everyone and family is not the only way to enhance a connection with Bangladesh.

As stated before (cf. 1.8.3), remaining in touch with family members back in Bangladesh is not very high on second generation migrants' priority lists. During the interviews, there was one thing that truly fortified the connection with the participants' Bangladeshi family, and it had nothing to do with telecommunications. On the contrary, for family members to connect, they had to meet face to face. In other words, holidays are vitally important to bring about the kinship metaphor.

2.5 HERITAGE HOLIDAYS

Travel brings about a relation between family members that would not exist without second generation migrants having seen their country of origin. This brings about an emotional connection. If second generation migrants have a truly meaningful trip back to the *Desh*, it will intensify that part of their identity. A long time ago, **Hadi** went for three months, which, to him, did not feel like a holiday. He felt it was a "[n]ice place to be" and that it "[took him] back to [his] roots"¹⁴¹. **Nazir** went there more recently. As it was the first time his mother had seen her siblings

¹³⁸ Interview 1 (ii)

¹³⁹ Interview 1 (iii)

¹⁴⁰ Interview 2 (v)

¹⁴¹ Interview 11 (lxix)

and parents in a very long time, the trip to his heritage was very emotional, which brought him closer to the history of the place (cf. 1.8.1) but even more close to his family. He testifies that his

[c]ountry... it's... it's beautiful, but it's, you know, it's still twenty or thirty years behind to the rest of the world. But it... It was a nice feeling, seeing all my uncles and my aunts, my mum's immediate brothers and sisters, and they're all back home. So we all sat down, in the village, my granddad's village, where my mum was born and raised. It's the warm feeling of everyone was there.¹⁴²

That warm feeling is shared by **Nazmin**, who, despite saying she does not have a connection and she rather avoids her family abroad, still messages her cousins through WhatsApp (cf. 1.8.3), “[b]ecause [she] went last year and [she] went quite recently and [she] met a couple of them, and [she] was able to kind of bond with them”¹⁴³.

Travel helps second generation migrants envision their past, present and future (cf. Karner 2007). It reminds them of the people they might have been, had their parents not chosen to migrate. Those holidays will then make them pity those family members who were left behind, which does not make second generation migrants feel closer to them but it does bring about a sense of connection, to know that this could have been them. As **Nazmul** states,

It's the classic saying of “always be thankful of what you have because there are those out there who have less and they're still happy”. So you go out there, and you see, and you immediately become very appreciative for the things that you've got in your own country because... One thing wrong here, I mean, one, one decision here, over there, is the reason why I ended up in this country and my cousins... as opposed to the other way around so... In that sense, you look at it, and you feel very grateful.¹⁴⁴

Other members of the Khatun family all agree that they “would not be happy in Bangladesh”¹⁴⁵, because of the outlook on life their family abroad have: as **Nasmin** states, “There isn't. All there is, is marriage. They have to get to London, somehow”¹⁴⁶. **Nazir** affirms that feeling by stating the following:

When I went, first time, I saw, the moment you get out of the airport, you can see beggars there, erm... my... cousin's brothers and sisters, roughly my age if not younger, having to wake up early in the morning to go to work and then going to school, so they can pay for their own education. Whereas in this country, government pays for it. Yeah, I think the trip had an effect on me, definitely, in that sense.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Interview 9 (xxxix)

¹⁴³ Interview 10 (lxii)

¹⁴⁴ Interview 11 (lxxi)

¹⁴⁵ Interview 10 (lx)

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Interview 9 (xli)

Lepina also felt bad for the inhabitants of her country of origin, but she decided to do something else about it: volunteering, in order “to sort of ‘give back’ in that sense”¹⁴⁸. She even stays up-to-date because of it:

*I think it's a result of having visited Bangladesh, because I saw a bit of it and came across it. [...] And I think if you engage with Bangladesh, in that sense that you've been, then you would take an interest in the sort of politics and the news and everything. Because, we still have family that are there.*¹⁴⁹

Not all people feel as engaged as Lepina after visiting the country, however. Despite the fact that nearly all of my participants¹⁵⁰ look forward to spending a holiday there, even if they have not been in a long time or if they say they do not necessarily feel a connection, their holiday experience remains superficial.

Salma predominantly sees holidays as shopping trips and prefers not to stay too long – when her colleague **Ferjana** states she used to spend the whole summer there every year, Salma shrieked she “would die!”¹⁵¹. When she is not in Bangladesh, she does miss it, however. She feels positively about the place, because “they just treat you like a princess [...] It's just different and nice”¹⁵². **Nazmul** confirms that, as he claims “when you go out there, and everyone just... loves you, ‘cause you're from this country”¹⁵³. Bangladeshis can easily notice the difference.

Not every participants goes as often as the next. **Rummel**, who is also looking forward to go back soon even though to him “Bangladesh would be more like a holiday”¹⁵⁴, talks about how much time had passed in between visits. On the record, **Nasmin** even claims she never went to Bangladesh – she even wrote down 0 on her participation form – while off the record she talked about the places she can still remember from her trips as a child after our conversation.

From these examples, it becomes clear that yet again, a lot of participants contradict themselves: they appear to have no connection on the surface, but subconsciously the holidays have an effect on them.

If they go on holiday and have a bad experience, however, this will reflect badly on their overall idea of the place where they came from. When **Afchana** went to bury her father and visit her family for comfort, she was confronted with corruption and people with bad intentions. Now, she feels hardly a connection towards her family members that live in Bangladesh, as she even states “if we are going, Mum, you can go to the village and go see them but I'm not going to come with

¹⁴⁸ Interview 12 (lxxx)

¹⁴⁹ Interview 12 (lxxxii)

¹⁵⁰ Except if they are scared to go because they are single and of marital age, cf. infra.

¹⁵¹ Interview 4 (xviii-xix)

¹⁵² Interview 4 (xvii)

¹⁵³ Interview 11 (lxx)

¹⁵⁴ Interview 2 (vi)

you”¹⁵⁵. Afchana still would like to go back to the country, but for different reasons: she would like to visit nice places, instead of being scared of genies, black magic and kobiraji¹⁵⁶.

Not only the people who have bad experiences will feel that way, but also those who have heard “horror stories”¹⁵⁷ will have a bad perception of their country of origin. This is especially the case amongst unmarried females, who are scared that they will get kidnapped and married off. As **Tasnim** says, “[i]t’s just like a [free] passport”¹⁵⁸. **Naziyah** agrees, stating “I’d just get kidnapped, or harassed”¹⁵⁹.

Therefore it is not necessarily true for everyone that holidays bring them closer to their heritage. Bad experiences on holiday or the fear of going there might make them identify less with their country of origin. Good experiences, and especially emotional experiences, however, do make the connection stronger, both with their families abroad and with the country itself. Superficial experiences or experiences of people who claim to lack a connection can also be meaningful, since from reading between the lines it becomes clear that the participants have subconsciously developed a connection after all.

2.6 BASIC IDENTITY REDEFINED

Developing a connection through travel will nevertheless not shake second generation migrants from the feeling that they might be caught in between societies. As **Salma** states, while they treat her like a princess, they also treat her like a foreigner:

They would see that you’re not from there?

*Yeah, yeah. Apparently they would just realize. Even when we used to go shopping, my cousins would be like, “you guys don’t speak, we do all the talking”. Like when we used to go and buy all dresses and stuff, a dress for like 80 pounds, they would lie and tell us, like, “100 pounds”. So what they do, they put the price up!*¹⁶⁰

In that sense, second generation migrants are treated as strangers in their country of origin.

In the cases of my research participants, however, this does not imply that they would turn to ethnicity in order to construct a coping mechanism, as not all of them feel strongly about their connection to Bangladesh and the part being a Bengali plays in their identity. To prove this, I would like to point out to the fact that the results from my observations from the field were mixed:

¹⁵⁵ Interview 6 (xxvii)

¹⁵⁶ Interview 6 (xxviii)

¹⁵⁷ Interview 10 (lxiii)

¹⁵⁸ Interview 10 (lii)

¹⁵⁹ Interview 10 (lxv)

¹⁶⁰ Interview 5 (xix-xx)

family, soil, gifts and holidays supposedly facilitate a connection, but this was only true in a number of cases.

As we have seen, group identities are not unidimensional (cf. Song 2003). Even though all second generation migrants acquire their parents' ethnic backgrounds at birth (cf. Isaacs 1975), that does not mean that all of them will find this a crucial aspect for their identity. Rather than seeing their ethnicity as a restriction, modern individuals value the stranger in themselves (cf. Kristeva 1990) and therefore, they will also emphasize other features of their identity.

Not everyone felt their family relations with those abroad to be important, or feel that this part of their identity could truly contribute to who they are. Also, not all experiences abroad were meaningful – some of the experiences even made the connection worse.

This signifies, however, that the idea that second generation migrants turn to ethnogenesis in order to cope with their multiple identity does not apply to all research participants. Since it is only important to some, ethnicity cannot be defined as the basic group identity of the participants.

A point upon which literally all of the participants did agree, was the role Islam played for their identity. They see their religious conviction as the basis from which other layers of their identity can develop. Accordingly, their religion, rather than their ethnicity, can be defined as their basic identity. Consequently, their basic group identity also goes beyond their ethnicity, as in their view, *Ummah* (i.e. the idea of a transnational Muslim community) is not restricted to the history and the culture of their ancestors, nor to their ethnic roots. Therefore, I would like to dedicate my last chapter to religion, and look into the true basic identity and basic group identity for the research participants involved in this dissertation.

CHAPTER III:

RELIGION

*Well, I'm Muslim. And I guess the country where we grew up
allows me to practice my religion in a way that is comfortable to me,
and not be judged, yet judged at the same time...*

(Nazmul, lxxviii)

RELIGION

--- Theory

In an immigrant context, the concept of ethnicity is very much intertwined with the concept of religion (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 13). However, through migration, “[c]osmopolitan encounters with ‘others’ of the same faith tradition [...] have broadened awareness and self-conscious explorations of global religious identities *at the expense of ethnicity*” (McLoughlin 2010, 545; emphasis added).

According to Smart (1987), studying ethnic identities is crucial for scholars interested in religion, as, first and foremost, “it can provide a clue to patterns of religious transformation” (Smart 1987, 289). Migratory processes “[force] a reassessment of the meaning and nature of religious practices and ideas” (Knott 1997, 757), because these migrants’ religious conviction is “set in tension with those of other, more well-established communities” (*ibid.*).

Smart points out that migration can have an influence on how the religion is practiced in the country of origin (cf. 3.2.2). Moreover, because of migration, religion becomes transnationally intertwined with the modern world. For Smart, believing also implies belonging. With regard to the “[multi-ethnic] commonplace” (Smart 1987, 289) we live in today, the author realizes that believers grow more aware of global religious identities. He therefore recognizes the evolution to “a consciousness of belonging to a world community” (Smart 1987, 291).

With respect to Islam¹⁶¹, this implies that believers from all over the world are growing more and more conscious of the worldwide Muslim community, otherwise known as *Ummah*. Especially for younger generations (cf. 3.3), it is important to “look outward to Muslims world-wide who claim shared objectives and attitudes” (Knott 1997, 769), but also to negotiate the hierarchical position of their conviction in interaction with non-Muslims. After all, *Ummah* is a “model [that] would necessitate that Muslims engage with other people, nations, worldviews, religions and ideologies to work for a set of moral objectives that we can and must define together” (Ibrahim 1991, 309).

For that reason, we will first examine the different paths Muslim migrants are inclined to take **(3.1)**, before exploring one of these routes in the context of Bangladesh **(3.2)**. Ultimately, we will

¹⁶¹ Islam is the religion this dissertation focuses upon as it is the conviction of most Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshis: about 90% of them are Muslims.

find out what trajectory second generation migrants would theoretically take **(3.3)**, which we will then verify by looking at the field research results.

3.1 ISLAMIC TRAJECTORIES

In Barth's (1994) vision, Muslims increasingly perceive their identity in terms of religion, rather than in terms of ethnicity (Barth 1994, 27). According to him, they use their religious emblems as ethnic markers (cf. 2.1). These markers are highly symbolic, and, as such, they actively create social borders (Barth 1994, 16).

The establishment of social borders is however not the only way in which Muslim migrants can deal with their religious identity. Waardenburg (1988) has proposed a series of seven "specific fundamental options" (Waardenburg 1988, 27) from which Muslims in Europe can 'choose' (cf. Martin 1995), but which do not exclude one another.

First, Waardenburg proposes a **secular** route, where the migrants fully neglect their Islamic identity – either abandoning all religious affiliations altogether or converting to another religion. Another possibility is the **cooperative** trajectory, which intertwines their Islamic identity with the (social or political) objectives of other groups that the migrants co-exist with.

The **cultural** route can also be taken. Here, the migrants would focus on social and cultural aspects of their identity, rather than their religious traits. On the opposite end of the spectrum, migrants can take the **religious** trajectory, where they would follow the scriptures – without necessarily being 'fundamentalist' – and neglect their cultural background.

The **ethnic-religious** route differs from all of the above as believers of this route will follow a specific national or regional version of their religion. One's religion is then seen as "the natural consequence" (*ibid.*) of one's ethnicity. When opting for the **behavioural** trajectory, migrants apply themselves to their rituals through ritual behaviour and nothing else. Finally, migrants who choose the **ideological** route, choose to either identify with the way their religion is practiced in their country of origin, or do exactly the opposite.

Identity, as emphasized time and again, is constantly in flux. Religious identities are no different. As Gardner (1995) states, "as forever reimagined, religious understandings are never homogeneous" (Gardner 1995, 229). Rather, they are a "continually contested domain" (*ibid.*). It would be narrow-minded, then, to state that one of Waardenburg's options is better or more frequent than the others.

However, Vertovec (2004) points out that, in his interpretation of Waardenburg, there is "a growing trend [...] for discarding national or regional traditions and focusing upon the Qur'an and

Sunna in order to distinguish what is truly Islamic – that is, normative – from what is secondary” (Waardenburg 1988, as cited in Vertovec 2004, 29). In other words, the ethnic-religious route is more and more omitted, in favour of the religious route.

From her field work in both Bangladesh and Britain, Gardner (1993) comes to a similar conclusion, stating that “[m]igrants to Britain [...] have moved from an Islam based around localised cultures and moulded to the culture and geography of the homelands, to an international Islam of Muslims from many difference countries and cultures” (Gardner 1993, 225). In other words, according to the author, British Bangladeshi Muslim migrants tend to disregard the cultural and ethnic-religious trajectories, and focus more on *Ummah*.

3.2 BENGALI ISLAM:

FROM SYMBOLS TO SCRIPTURE

Gardner (1995) classifies traditional Bengali Islam under ‘Sufism’, and, following Roy (1982) and Saiyed (1989), describes it as ‘syncretic’, which means that it combines orthodox traits of the religion with indigenous culture (Gardner 1995, 230). According to respondents to a governmental survey, “Bangladeshis subscribe to a ‘softer’ version of Islam, which was spread and mediated mainly through the Sufi tradition and is associated with the culture of Bengal” (Department of Communities and Local Government 2008, 41). As such, Bengali Islam has its own religious emblems (Gardner 1995, 230), used as ethnic – in this case, following Waardenburg, ethnic-religious – markers (cf. Barth 1994).

3.2.1 TRADITIONAL TENDENCIES OVERSEAS

According to Vertovec (2004) and Gardner (1993), however, this ethnic-religious trajectory of Islam will be disregarded by migrants abroad (cf. 3.1). The religious option will be more attractive to them, as it will give them a sense of restoration of their tradition.

Since migrants (second generation migrants especially, cf. 2.2.2 and 3.3) do not fully feel at home in either their country of origin nor the country where they are residing, they tend to return to something which deems familiar (cf. Leman 1982 and Roosens 1989). They are more self-conscious (Metcalf 1996, 7) and simply more concerned with Islamic practice (Metcalf 1996, 9). Also, as they are now global citizens, they feel more connected to the international Muslim community that surrounds them (cf. Smart 1987).

Taking this into account, Muslim migrants are “bound to be more traditional” (Roosens 1994, 99). Often, they are a lot more conservative than their “counterparts in the region of origin” (Snauwaert et al. 1999, 12).

British Bangladeshis are no exception to this. Especially second generation British Bangladeshi Muslims (cf. 3.3) view the local practices as “peripheral” (Gardner 1995, 242) or even “backward” (Gardner 1995, 234). As Gardner (1995) states, “[i]n their new locations, Bengali Muslims are now, with other Muslim groups, constructing a new community based around the ideas of an international brotherhood of Islam and a central body of text.” (Gardner 1995, 242-243).

3.2.2 NEW TRADITIONALISM: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

Relatives of those migrants went through a similar transition. Especially in Sylhet¹⁶², religion used to be seen as something based on regional symbols rather than scripturalism (Gardner 1995, 232). Historically, it was seen as a syncretic region, albeit there always was some sort of “religious heterogeneity amongst local Muslims” (Gardner 1999, 49).

However, since the first wave of migration, there has been an ideological change (Gardner 1995, 233) towards Islamic purism: “[p]raxis associated with the *Desh* is losing ground to that associating with *Bidesh*, foreign centres of knowledge and spirituality” (Gardner 1995, 234).

This evolution is not fully caused by overseas migration, but both processes are economically linked (Gardner 1999, 48). Through gifts and remittances (cf. 2.2.1), wealthy Bangladeshis abroad (often literally) acquired status and influenced the local culture (*ibid.*).

This, however, does not entail that Sylhet moved away from all that is modern. Purism does not necessarily imply traditionalism (cf. Waardenburgs religious route). On the contrary, as Gardner (1995) puts it, “[r]ather than it being a return to ‘traditional’ values, Islamic purism is [inherently] modernising, without begin Westernizing, for it promotes the notion of advancement and progression toward the ideal of a wholly Islamic social order” (Gardner 1995, 235).

The author defines the orthodoxy in the region as “a ‘new traditionalism’, an increasing puritanism which seeks to reject the old, localized ways” (Gardner 1999, 47). The primary centre of that order and of knowledge and spirituality is Saudi-Arabia (Gardner 1995, 233), as it is seen as “the *Desh* of Allah” (Gardner 1995, 238).

3.3 SECOND GENERATION MUSLIM MIGRANTS

Second generation migrants are influenced by their first generation parents. They are going through the ideological transition towards scripturalism, as “[c]ustoms and rituals are handed down from one generation to another through a kind of social osmosis” (Smart 1987, 291). Nonetheless, the metaphor of osmosis, as Barth (1969) pointed out (cf. 1.1), does leave space for

¹⁶² Sylhet is the region where most British Bangladeshis originate from (cf. Introduction).

negotiation. This implies that the next generation will not necessarily follow the previous' generations views on religion:

the children [...] of migrants, born and socialized in quite different contexts to their parents, increasingly produce their own local-global interpretations of traditions, often arguing for the separation of religious 'universals' from cultural 'particulars' in ways their parents [...] rarely did. (McLoughlin 2010, 545)

Second generation migrants will thus take this process towards orthodoxy one step further. Eade (1997) described first generation migrants as people looking for the promised land that still considered their country of origin their spiritual home. In the case of second generation British Bangladeshis, these migrants, having been positioned in between multiple identities (cf. 2.2.2), no longer consider Bangladesh as their spiritual home.

However, Bangladeshis born in Britain cannot see the country in which they were born as their spiritual home either, as they remain a religious minority in the country. As such, second generation Muslim migrants will want to create social borders (cf. Barth 1994) with the "white majority" (Karner 2007, 87). They will also point out to their parents that they are mistaken in the way they practice their religion: first generation migrants "[do] not understand Islam 'properly' and had wrongly conflated their traditional, localized cultures with 'real Islam'" (*ibid.*).

In other words, more than their parents did, second generation Muslim migrants will disregard the ethnic-religious trajectory and opt for the religious one. Since British Bangladeshis can neither turn to Bangladesh nor to Britain for their spiritual homecoming, they will rely more and more on Saudi-Arabia (cf. 3.2.2) as the "primary centre in religious geography" (Gardner 1995, 233).

RELIGION

Observations from the field

Living in an environment where most ‘well-established’ (cf. Knott 1997) inhabitants do not share your religious beliefs, is a situation many migrants face. It challenges them to reassess or even transform the way in which they practice their religion. Consequently, these religious practices become more important to them.

As all of my participants unanimously stated that their religion is very important for their identity, it is clear that religion, and not ethnicity, can be seen as their basic identity. In this part, we will find out why that is, how that is manifested, and what makes the stance of the second generation different from their elders’.

First, we will have a closer look at Waardenburg’s theory on the options Muslim migrants have, and see which apply to the research participants’ vision on religion (3.4). Moreover, we will learn about the importance of the transnational Muslim network (3.5). Finally, we will look into the way in which second generation migrants uphold traditions and how that differs from how their parents and the family they have left in Bangladesh practice their religion (3.6).

3.4 CHOSEN TRAJECTORIES

In order to determine the importance of religion, and the way to adapt your religion to the country where you were born as a second generation migrant, Waardenburg (cf. 3.1) has presented Muslim migrants with seven ‘fundamental options’. As these are not fundamentally exclusive, two of them describe the stance of my research participants.

Second generation British Bangladeshi migrants are very much into their religion. The *secular* trajectory is not an option for them, because that would imply that they leave the most important part of their identity behind. Nor would they fit the description of the *behavioural* trajectory, as their religion means more to them than only rituals: it is also what makes them happy or complete. After a relationship gone south, **Kolsuma** turned into her religion, found out how much it meant to her and she is a much happier and much better person now¹⁶³. **Ahmed** was in a bad place five

¹⁶³ Interview 5 (xxiv)

years ago. He was clubbing, drinking, “just being a youngster”¹⁶⁴. Religion turned his life around: it gave him a peace of mind.

Another possible trajectory would be the *ethnic-religious* option, which implies that the participants would follow a local version of their faith, based on their ethnicity. It is Barth’s (1994) understanding that to Muslims, religion is more important for their identity than ethnicity. This conclusion was also the outcome of the previous chapter of this dissertation: the research participants are not nearly as unanimous about ethnicity as they are about religion. Therefore, the *ideological* option is not possible either, as the participants do not attribute their religion to an ideology they have in favour or against that country.

When I asked **Rummel** whether or not he associated his country of origin to his religion, he said “I am Muslim. But I would not connect that to Bangladesh”¹⁶⁵. The only way in which he would associate it, is in terms of “It’s part of my heritage in the sense that, obviously, it came from my forefathers”¹⁶⁶, but to him, that is the only reason to connect it to Bangladesh. As he states,

*In Bengali culture, I realize, when it comes to Islam, there’s a lot of culture mixed with Islam and that is the discrepancy between the two. That is why I stay away from the cultural side of Bangladesh.*¹⁶⁷

In the same conversation, **Shafi** also gives his views on that topic, claiming it is very important to keep culture and religion separate:

*for me, being Muslim is separate [...] It’s important to distinguish Islam and Bangladesh, or Bengali culture, because regardless of what background you are from, you know, you have the choice. You can’t choose to be Bengali: you’re either born into a Bengali family or you’re not. So it’s important to have a balance between these.*¹⁶⁸

Afchana claims that “Bengali culture and religion, they do clash occasionally”¹⁶⁹, but to her, “it’s one and the same, really”¹⁷⁰. **Nazmul** is more inclined to agree with Shafi, stating he likes “the idea of them being separate”¹⁷¹. As such, most of my participants do not view the *cultural* route as a probable option.

Generally speaking, second generation British Bangladeshis separate their religion from their cultural background and follow the Qur’an. Therefore, they choose the *religious* trajectory. However, these participants cannot be defined ‘fundamentalist’ on the basis of that assumption. On the contrary, they function in a society where there co-exist members of other religious beliefs

¹⁶⁴ Interview 8 (xxxvi)

¹⁶⁵ Interview 2 (viii)

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Interview 6 (xxix)

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Interview 11 (lxxvii)

(cf. supra). As such, they do not only take the religious route, but they also follow the *cooperative* trajectory. Even though they wear religious emblems such as the hijab (cf. 3.5), they choose not to create social borders (cf. Barth 1994) or to create a divide with the other members of the multicultural society (cf. 1.3) they were born into. On the contrary, by accepting the stranger in themselves (cf. Kristeva 1990), they refrain from seeing fellow citizens as ‘eternal others’ (cf. 2.1).

Of the two, the religious route nonetheless remains the most important trajectory. This affirms Gardner’s (1993) and Vertovec’s (2004) theory that, in a transnational context, local versions of religion are declining in favour of more orthodox views. The importance of *Ummah* for this development is significant: without imagining a world-wide community, it would not be possible to imagine a religion that is hardly influenced by local practices or ethnic roots.

3.5 TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM

Ummah can be associated with both transnationalism and Islam. It is the expression of ‘shared objectives and attitudes’ (cf. Knott 1997) throughout the Muslim world. It also signifies that this Muslim world does not begin nor end with the country of origin of those who follow the religion.

The research participants define the term in their own words. **Kolsuma** reflects upon “all the people, no matter what race, but we’re all following the same religion, and I can just picture it, everyone in the same direction”¹⁷². **Rummel** refers to *Ummah* as follows:

*When I think of Ummah, I think of the Muslim population in general. When I think of Islam, and the roots of Islam, it goes back to the Prophet’s time, that is where it originated, from Saudi Arabia. So my affiliation to Islam would be more toward Saudi Arabia rather than Bangladesh.*¹⁷³

This idea they have developed of the concept, hardly leads them back to **Bangladesh** or their **Bengali** heritage – to most of them, culture should be separated from religion (cf. 3.4). Nor would it make them identify with the **United Kingdom**, as Muslims are a minority in the predominantly protestant country. However, a number of them do prefer it, as they see the UK as their home, rather than Bangladesh (cf. 1.8.2). If it brings them closer to anything British, it would be **London**: the cosmopolitan city is very multicultural, and according to **Afchana**, in London – like in Islam – there are “so many different faces, so many different types of people”¹⁷⁴, that she could not imagine living anywhere else in the UK. More than all of the above, their transnational identity would make them identify with **Saudi Arabia**, the origin of their religion. However, only **Rummel** stated he is more inclined to “follow the roots from where it actually originated from, in Saudi”¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷² Interview 5 (xxiv)

¹⁷³ Interview 2 (viii)

¹⁷⁴ Interview 6 (xxx)

¹⁷⁵ Interview 2 (viii)

This does not mean that they are less orthodox than the literature presents them to be. All the women I interviewed, except for **Afchana**¹⁷⁶ and research outsider **Ferjana**¹⁷⁷, wear their hijab on a daily basis. The only ones that I did not meet wearing their hijab, were the members of the Khatun family, since I met them in their home. If they were to go outside, they would also wear it. As **Naziyah** states, “I look like a Muslim, I don’t look like a Bengali, with my hijab”¹⁷⁸. In Bangladesh, hardly anyone wears a hijab: “that’s a Muslim country [and] they don’t even wear scarfs”¹⁷⁹. The fact that British Bangladeshis do find it important to wear it, confirms Barth’s idea that religious emblems become increasingly important for Muslim migrants. In East London, other British Bangladeshis would even look down upon those who do not wear their hijab, as **Salma** testifies:

*When I got married, like, nearly two years ago [and moved to East London], I didn’t wear it then. I did feel odd, because like everyone wears it here. I do feel odd, people look at you. Most of the Bengalis are like that. They just look at you and they just judge you. They just look at you!*¹⁸⁰

Back in Sylhet, people have a similar attitude. The dress sense is “very traditional, innit?”¹⁸¹ and their attitude is also judgmental, as **Salma** states “when you’re back home [to Sylhet], and you wear English clothes, they just look at you, God, what is she wearing”¹⁸². She also explains why she also had to change her hair colour, in order not to provoke any judgment:

*Sylhet is not like other places. [...] No one would colour his hair! Before I went to Bangladesh, my dad was like, colour your hair before you go, I don’t want you to put shame to my family. I couldn’t believe it! But then I just understood what he meant, because, if I went there, with my red hair, everyone would just look at me like “ooooh!”.*¹⁸³

The reaction to the way Salma normally looks, gives us an indication of how traditional Sylhet is. Research outsider **Ferjana** explains that where she originally comes from, the capital of Bangladesh, people are less orthodox than in Sylhet: “In Dhaka, they are not that religious, they would try to follow Indian culture. But in Sylhet they are more conservative”¹⁸⁴. While Bangladesh itself is considered “a pretty secular country”¹⁸⁵, its northeastern corner has become more orthodox due to an ideological change based on renewed purist values, influenced by Sylhetis living abroad.

¹⁷⁶ Interview 6 (xxix)

¹⁷⁷ Interview 4 (xv)

¹⁷⁸ Interview 10 (lvii)

¹⁷⁹ Interview 4 (xiv)

¹⁸⁰ Interview 4 (xv)

¹⁸¹ Interview 4 (xiv)

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Interview 4

¹⁸⁴ Interview 4 (xiv-xv)

¹⁸⁵ Interview 11 (lxxiv)

Therefore, British Bangladeshis do not only transform the way they themselves practice their religion; they also influence the way in which traditional values in their country of origin – or rather, region of origin – are reconsidered (cf. 3.2.2). Their basic group identity is affected by their religion on a transnational scale, rather than only a local one, which proves once more to the importance of religion.

3.6 SECOND GENERATION IDENTITY

Second generation British Bangladeshis, as I have already stated, no longer consider their country of origin pivotal for their religion: their spiritual home has also migrated, and has become part of a transnational Muslim movement. This makes second generation migrants more inclined to follow scripturalism, rather than regional Bengali traditions. As **Salma** states, “young people are like, packed into their religion now”¹⁸⁶. **Ruman** explains this statement, by saying that although he “[doesn’t] think there is a strong difference between [his] parents’ generation and [his] generation”¹⁸⁷, he does see “subtle differences”¹⁸⁸:

*My generation is probably a little bit more liberal than my parents’. More reforming the tradition than it is a radical difference. [...] The secular movement in Bangladesh, I guess, it is very strong. Not as strong as continental Europe. Although we probably are as strongly secular, as driven as... I think we used to be more conservative and now we can be more relaxed. More traditional. Maybe a little bit less wound up about certain things.*¹⁸⁹

In his view, being more traditional implies being more relaxed and less conservative. Returning to scripturalism, to him, means holding a more liberal view than his parents. To him, being Muslim is “[p]robably the most important thing in [his] life”¹⁹⁰.

British Bangladeshis born and raised in London feel that their country of origin is not the most important thing in order to be able to narrate their identity. To them Bangladesh is “just a country”¹⁹¹ and if they would have been born earlier on, they would have been considered Indian or even Pakistani¹⁹².

Hence, some of them, like **Ruman**, prefer their ethnicity to their nationality. All of them, however, prefer their religion to all of the above. As **Kolsuma** claims, they “were always taught that religion comes first, before [their] race”¹⁹³. This is manifested through religious emblems, such as the hijab,

¹⁸⁶ Interview 4 (xv)

¹⁸⁷ Interview 3 (xi)

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Interview 3 (xi-xii)

¹⁹⁰ Interview 3 (xi)

¹⁹¹ Interview 4 (xxi)

¹⁹² Interview 3 (xi)

¹⁹³ Interview 5 (xxiv)

but also through their attitude – or at least the way they express that attitude, both verbally and written.

In the PARTICIPATION FORMS, all but one participants claimed to put religion first. **Lepina** put it second place (cf. 1.8.2), but during the interview she did claim she thinks “it pretty much is [her] identity”¹⁹⁴.

Other participants uttered similar affiliations. **Nazir** says his “day-to-day life is based around it”¹⁹⁵. **Nasmin** claims she would if her children want to marry someone who’s not Bengali “as long as they’re Muslim”¹⁹⁶. **Jamshid** finds it “really important ‘cause [...] [Islam is] mentioned in every Holy Book that there is”¹⁹⁷ and even though he says he would be fine with marrying someone who does not share his faith, he states “you can marry someone who is not in the same religion as you but sometimes they tend to choose, like after you’re married, they tend to choose that religion”¹⁹⁸.

All these expressions make it very clear that to my participants, there is nothing more important than their religion. As such, their basic identity is not made up from their country of origin, not from the country they were born in, and it does not have anything to do with their ethnicity either: to second generation British Bangladeshis, religion is key.

¹⁹⁴ Interview 12 (lxxxiii)

¹⁹⁵ Interview 9 (xli)

¹⁹⁶ Interview 1 (iv)

¹⁹⁷ Interview 7 (xxxiii)

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Comparing theoretical claims to my field research results, it has become clear that identity is not something which is conscious to most research participants. Also, it is something which is highly dynamic, and therefore not all participants will react the same way or regard certain aspects of their identity as important as others.

In the *first chapter*, we have focused on the ambiguity of 'identity'. The heterogeneity of the concept has been a source for discussion in the past. Therefore, it is only natural that my research does not offer answers that are set in stone either. Each person I have gotten the opportunity to speak with, had his or her unique point of view. No two participants defined their identity the same way. This is exactly what has made this study interesting. In conclusion of this dissertation, I will therefore summarize both the aspects they agreed on, and those they did not agree on.

According to Martin, identity is influenced by history, space and culture. Hence, second generation British Bangladeshis would be drawn to the history of their country of origin, the places that remind them of that, and the cultural features they inherited as a manifestation of both previous postulates.

In terms of **history**, not all participants value the narrative behind the country their parents were born in. Exploring the **spatial** aspects, a similar conclusion is apparent. Most participants focus on the UK – or rather, London (cf. *infra*) – than on Bangladesh. Subconsciously, however, both aspects retain some importance. Most participants still refer to Bangladesh as 'home'; they even contradict themselves during their negotiation. A lot of participants state they have no connection, but in the way they express themselves, the connection is subconsciously there.

Therefore, there is still some space for Bangladesh among second generation British Bangladeshis. However, this connection does not manifest itself through **media or telecommunications**. Most participants refrain from watching or reading the news about Bangladesh. Also, they tend to avoid keeping in touch, although they do sometimes use Facebook or WhatsApp. If anything, their closeness to Bangladesh is apparent through the importance of their **language** of origin. All but one claim they would definitely teach Bangla – or, in most of their cases, Sylheti – to their children. That way, they want to prevent the **culture** from fading. Most of the participants remain proud of their culture, even though some associate it with corruption.

In sum, second generation British Bangladeshis do not necessarily approve of everything Bangladesh stands for and they will not value every aspect of their identity associated with their country of origin. But they do deem their country of origin important, as they want to preserve

the language. This appreciation for their language of origin can be interpreted as a love for the country itself, as language was crucial in Bangladesh' struggle for independence.

As Bangladesh only became independent in 1971, however, a number of participants feel that the country itself is not important for their identity. They feel that their **ethnicity**, rather than their parents' nationality, takes them back to their roots. For that reason, I have dedicated the *second chapter* to their Bengali background. There, we have learnt that this connection is especially fortified through **family and holidays**. In a number of cases, however, the latter made the image participants have of Bangladesh worse.

The participants' connection to their country of origin or to their ethnic roots is negligible in comparison to **religion**, as we have seen in the *third chapter*. Unlike other aspects of their identity, Islam does play a role in their everyday lives, and, because of that, it has gone through a transformation. As second generation British Bangladeshis regard their faith as their basic identity, they have become more focused on Islamic practice and consequently their religious markers have become more apparent.

This conclusion is supported by the PARTICIPATION FORMS. All but one participant chose 'Muslim' as the most important feature for their identity. The one person that did not, chose **London**. This is not surprising. By consciously emphasizing their religion, the participants do not actively create social borders, as they live in a multicultural and therefore tolerant city. Although Waardenburg's religious path stands at the top of their personal identity hierarchies, they still follow the cooperative trajectory. In sum, throughout history, these migrants have wound up in a space that allows them to express their culture, roots and religion: London. For that reason, the city they were born in is next in line in terms of their identity hierarchy.

Although Bangladesh and Bengal are important to some participants, not all of them find these aspects crucial for their identity. This ratifies the fact that to my participants, their connection to their country of origin largely remains subconscious. Its importance can therefore not compare to the role of Islam.

Overall, then, second generation British Bangladeshis are not transmigrants. They will not engage in continuing activities, because they do not feel fully connected to their country of origin. The occasional holiday Portes (cf. Introduction) hinted at, is sufficient for them in order to maintain some sense of closeness, as they only experience their transnational identity subconsciously. However, they remain transmigrants in the sense that their religion brings them closer to the idea of an imagined transnational community – not of Bangladeshis, Bengalis, or British Bangladeshis, but of Muslims.

In conclusion, as identities are fluid, every individual will personally decide on what aspects of his or her identity he or she will focus on. As such, the individuals I have had the pleasure to speak with, have created their own personal hierarchies, based on their own preferences and experiences. However, all participants agreed on the importance of their religion. Therefore, Islam can be seen as the one postulate which is crucial in their negotiation. Put differently, while everyone has their own opinion on the role of Bangladeshi in their identity, their opinion of Islam is univocal. As they do not relate their religion to their country of origin, the importance of Bangladesh falls short in comparison.

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ANNEX I: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS: Transcript from recorded interviews

These are the transcribed records of twelve interviews with eighteen research participants that matched the criteria. I taped them in the course of field research conducted in London, UK, from the 13th of October until the 12th of November 2014. As stated earlier, I transcribed these conversations as accurately as possible, although I must admit some irrelevant parts of the conversation are left out (cf. baby talk in interview 10).

WEEK 1: 13/10 UNTIL 19/10

Glesne (1999) claims the beginning of field research is “the most anxiety-producing, as you question whether people will accept you and whether what you are doing is ‘right’” (Glesne 1999, 46). For that reason, as well as in order to get to know British Bangladeshis on an informal level, without the pressure of a recording device, I only engaged in off the record conversations (cf. annex II). They were mostly with first generation migrants, conducted in order to create a snowball sample (cf. supra), so I did not feel the need to ask any participants from the first week for a second (on the record) interview. From week 2 onwards, however, I did tape all conversations, and transcribed those where the participants matched the research criteria. Those who did not match, are included (but not transcribed) in annex II.

WEEK 2: 20/10 UNTIL 26/10

Interview 1 (participants n° 1 and 2)	ii
Interview 2 (participants n° 3 and 4)	v
Interview 3 (participant n° 5)	ix

WEEK 3: 27/10 UNTIL 2/11

Interview 4 (participant n° 6)	xiii
Interview 5 (participant n° 7)	xxii
Interview 6 (participant n° 8)	xxv

WEEK 4: 3/11 UNTIL 9/11

Interview 7 (participant n° 9)	xxxi
Interview 8 (participant n° 10)	xxxiv
Interview 9 (participant n° 11)	xxxix

WEEK 5: 10/11 UNTIL 12/11

Interview 10 (focus group with participants n° 1, 12, 13 and 14)	xlili
Interview 11 (participants n° 15, 16 and 17)	lxix
Interview 12 (participant n° 18)	lxxx

SECOND WEEK

Interview 1: Nasmin Ali **(1)** and Papia Begum **(2)**

22/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar, South Quay

Appointment through Shohef Sarang, one of my flatmates, who is their colleague

I'm Sarah, I live with Shohef. I'm here in London for a month to do research on Bangladesh. I've been there in April. Have you ever been to Bangladesh?

Papia: Yeah, I've been like three times.

Nasmin: Really??? I've just been once, a really long time ago.

You were both born here, in East London?

Papia: East London, yeah.

Nasmin: I was born in Central London. And now that I'm married, I live in South East London.

You've been to Bangladesh three times.

Papia: I've been once when I was younger and twice in 2011. Twice in one year.

Was that for a special occasion?

Papia: No... First reason we went was that we had not gone in so long, and secondly we were there on business as much as for seeing the family.

And your parents were born in Bangladesh? In what city?

Nasmin & Papia: Sylhet.

Do you have contact with the family members you visited?

Papia: Yeah, regular contact.

And your parents moved here when they were getting married or?

Papia: After they got married, I think. I don't know exactly.

Do you still consider yourself Bangladeshi, being born here?

Nasmin: I have no sort of connection to Bangladesh. I know that is bad. Most of my family lives abroad. And then my dad's sister passed away, so...

And right now you have no family living in Sylhet?

Nasmin: No... there'd still be some cousins, but I wouldn't know them.

Do you feel the same way?

Papia: I, erm, no, I feel as if I've got a connection there. Most of my mum's side is still there. So like her brothers and sisters, and their kids. All of my first cousins are still there. Yeah, I would consider myself British Bangladeshi.

Nasmin: I'd agree, considering my parents' background. But other than that I don't feel the connection, being brought up here, no reason for that connection.

But if people ask you where you are from, you say...?

Nasmin: I'd say I'm British Bangladeshi, yeah.

Do you call your relatives often?

Nasmin: They call us quite a bit, he he he. Yeah, that's how we keep in touch. There's regular contact.

Do they update you only on family matters or also on what is happening in Bangladesh?

Nasmin: Family matters, if everything's OK, stuff like that. Actually, I don't talk to them about Bangladesh, that's mostly my mum.

But do you individually follow the news on Bangladesh? For example, if something like Rana Plaza happens, do you pay extra attention?

Nasmin: Yeah, the collapse, we did follow that here. In terms of elections and things like that, I'd be honest, I don't pay much attention. I don't know who won. I get confused, I guess I've heard of two female prime ministers and there's two, is it two? Yeah? Two political parties, but I just get confused between the two.

Papia: If I see something about Bangladesh on the news, I follow that. For example with the building, my family went round to collect donations. Politics, I have no time for that. It is all corrupt. I've heard of a history though where a journalist spoke bad about certain politicians and it just got removed from the website.

Did you just happen to come across that story or did you go looking for it?

Papia: Through my parents. It was in one of the main newschannels. That story was aired for a day, and then removed, so we don't know what happened.

So your parents watch the news channels, they sort of look for it, but you don't?

Papia: I guess it has to do with our dialect, the thing is that we don't understand. Do you understand, Nasmin?

Nasmin: We speak Sylheti. I can't understand a word they're saying.

But you still speak Sylheti?

Nasmin: Yes.

Do you speak it at home?

Nasmin: Only when I speak to my mum, or with relatives who don't speak English. Not with my siblings. And now I have inlaws as well so I speak more Bengali. My husband is Bengali also, but he's very... He's brought up in East London.

From what part of Bangladesh is he?

Nasmin: Also from Sylhet.

Was it a natural choice to marry someone from the same region?

Nasmin: Erm. It just sort of happened. But I don't think my parents would agree otherwise.

You don't think they'd be agreeing with you marrying someone from Britain?

Nasmin: No way.

Would you agree, if your children want to marry someone who's not Bengali?

Nasmin: Yeah... As long as they're Muslim.

How big a role does Islam play in your identity?

Nasmin: It plays a bigger role than being Bangladeshi.

Papia: Same.

Do you also follow news that affects Islam, like Syria or Gaza?

Papia: Yeah.

Do you follow that more than Bangladeshi news?

Nasmin: Yeah. I think 8... 90 % Islam and 10 % Bangladesh.

Interview 2: Shafi Hasan (3) and Rummel Allah (4)

22/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar, South Quay

Appointment through Shohef Sarang, one of my flatmates, who is their colleague

You were both born here in (East) London?

Rummel: I was born and raised in East London, yeah. In Hackney.

Shafi: I was born in Central London. Now I've moved back to Northwest London. Bit further up, end of the Jubilee Line.

And your parents, were they born here or in Bangladesh?

Rummel: My parents were born back home, but they came here when they were quite young.

Shafi: My father was born in Bangladesh. My mother was born in Manchester, UK, but she went back to Bangladesh when she was four years old. After she was married, she moved back. She met my father in Bangladesh.

Have you ever been to Bangladesh?

Rummel: Yeah. A few times. Three times and going again in December now. There's a big gap between those visits. First time I was about seven, then sixteen, then eighteen, and now I'm 25 years old now so a big gap, ha ha.

Shafi: I went back in 2012 and before that, it was 1998 so also quite a big gap. We used to go more frequently when I was quite younger. No immediate plans to go now.

My parents are from Sylhet. I've got family from Dhaka and Chittagong. I went to see my grandma, a bit of a family reunion. Other family members live in Sweden, USA... So pretty much all my immediate family moved abroad [except his grandmother who lives in Sylhet].

Rummel: My grandparents are the only ones still living in Bangladesh, in Sylhet, no other immediate family. Most of my family are here, here in the UK and in the USA.

Do you have contact over the phone?

Rummel: My parents call them more or less every week or so. I only speak to them, you know, once in a blue moon. But I'm going again in December so...

Are you excited about going?

Rummel: I am! Every time I've been, there has always been an economical change. In comparison to when I first went, you can see the development, the technology as well... Hopefully this time around as well the technology will have developed. Should be good.

Do you consider yourselves Bangladeshi?

Rummel: Erm. I wouldn't say that. My roots are here, in the UK. I was born and brought up here. When I think of home, I don't think of Bangladesh – my home is here in the UK. Bangladesh would be more like a holiday. That is where my parents are from. Again, my parents spent most of their lives here as well. It's a difficult kind of question to ask. I've never been there as many

times or my duration of stay has never been long enough... mostly I'm there for two weeks and then I'm back. At the most. So I've never been there long enough to get culturized the way my parents have been. I wouldn't say 'home' but I would say 'roots'. My parents are from there. It's hard for me to relate to because I don't live there.

Do you have similar views about that?

Shafi: I think... Living in the UK, I mean, spending all my life here in the UK, I'd consider myself a British Bangladeshi. So my roots, as Rummel said, are in Bangladesh. It's not where home is but I still feel the connection with Bangladesh. I inherited stuff from there, my parents are from there, my grandparents are from there... I spent a lot of time there on holiday. I think culturally I am more influenced by Bangladesh, as opposed to socially, because I'm living here. But culturally it is quite important to me to have that relationship with Bangladesh so. All the history... also, our parents are still interested in sort of what happens there. They stay up-to-date with what happens in Bangladesh. They still have some family there. I think it's quite important and I think as generations are going on it's quite difficult to maintain that. Especially if we have kids in the future, I'm not sure how much of Bangladesh they will still appreciate. They will probably be going less often, there will probably be less reason to go.

Rummel: Personally, I think culture will start fading.

Shafi: Yeah.

Rummel: Because we're more engrossed here in the UK, so if we have children, their roots are going to be in the UK as well. As the years go, as the generations go, I think it's going to be faded.

Do you still speak Bangla?

Shafi: Yeah.

Rummel: Mine isn't as good as Shafi's but... I can understand it fluently, I can speak it, but it's a bit rusty.

Your parents, what language do they speak with you?

Rummel: I speak English to my parents.

Shafi: I speak to them in Bangla. English as well sometimes, but predominantly Bangla.

And amongst each other, you speak English?

Rummel: We never speak Bengali!

Shafi: Here and there, there must be a few lines or a few words... If we didn't want other people to understand ha ha. But other than that...

Do you have friends that you still speak Bangla to?

Shafi: Cousins coming over from Bangladesh to the UK. But living here, we speak mostly in English. Although the conversation can take place in Bangla, but for some reason, it automatically falls back to English. Maybe only with uncles... elders and family members...

I was especially interested when you talked about your parents who keep up-to-date about things going on in Bangladesh. Is that also the case for your parents?

Rummel: Yeah, that's the case as well. They are mostly connected with the Bengali channels, the Bengali news and Bengali newspapers as well. [...]

Do you take up those newspapers as well or watch those channels when the TV is on?

Rummel: The thing is, the dialect that they speak, I can't understand. And the language, the Bengali language, I can't read. So...

And papers in English?

Rummel: Not really. Again, the interest for me is not connected that much as it is for them. But, if for example I were in Bangladesh and I'd found an English newspaper, I'd be more inclined to pick it up. Being brought up here, I know what is happening, I know the situation. For me to read a Bengali newspaper in English... I could read it but it would mean not much to me, I would not understand the context, what's going on.

Do you maybe stay up-to-date via your parents (who call your grandparents) or how do you stay up-to-date?

Rummel: Frankly, I don't stay up-to-date. I've never called my parents up with questions about what is happening in Bangladesh. I haven't had the interest to do so. I don't know about yourself, Shafi, you might.

Shafi: I think that newschannels are mostly on at my parents', and I'm in the background, so... I don't take an active interest in knowing what is happening, but generally, you know, I get an idea of what happens. I also do charity work from here, that is sort of linked to Bangladesh. That way I stay connected to Bangladesh. In the UK, there are a lot of Bengali professionals who still consider themselves Bangladeshis and still doing sort of charity work from the UK to give something back to Bangladesh in a positive way. I think sometimes, even though I'm not always entirely aware of what is happening, it's like a natural instinct that takes us back to our roots. Through that [charity work], we get to know what is happening, like through the conversation you have with people, if there is anything you know current happening in Bangladesh.

So, for example, if something big happens, like Rana Plaza or the 2013 Trials, you take special interest in that?

Rummel: Erm. Yeah. Obviously if it affects Bangladesh, you know, within current affairs or international news in the headlines, you'd be exposed to it. But I, for my part, do not take generally daily interest so I don't know what is happening in Bangladeshi politics or how the government are making decisions and so on. As I said earlier, I'm pretty much established here in the UK...

If you see a headline about Bangladesh in the news, do you connect with that?

Rummel: Yeah of course. Because, again, my parents are from there. If it is a UK newspaper and Bangladesh is mentioned, I'd more or less go straight away to it and read it. Erm. But other than that, like virtually going back to Bangladesh, that probably will not happen, you know, from my perspective.

How much is your Islamic identity related to your identity as British Bangladeshi? Do you identify a lot with Islam?

Rummel: Yeah. From where I'm from... I am Muslim. But I would not connect that to Bangladesh. I'm a British citizen. My roots are here. I consider myself being English more than anything else. So, I don't know, the connection is... for me it's quite thin, being Bengali. It is separate from Islam. That is probably because of my upbringing. That connection is probably stronger for Shafi.

Shafi: I think erm, like, for me, being Muslim is separate, sort of, I mean, although it is part of my identity, like religious belief is separate from sort of culture, you know, sort of cultural... You know, there's British Bangladeshis who are Muslim or Hindu or Buddhists... That's more of a personal choice. If you were to ask me, how would I identify myself, I'm a British Muslim, as well as a British Bangladeshi. So erm, yeah, to me it's more of a personal choice. What individuals believe.

You don't consider it part of your heritage?

Rummel: It's part of my heritage in the sense that, obviously, it came from my forefathers. You know, but, I think speaking of Bangladesh as a country, which has only been formed for like 30 or so years, 35 years; so before that, you know, my forefather would have gotten their religion from different regions, possibly the Middle East, so... When I think of Islam or being Muslim, I don't affiliate myself with Bangladesh, I affiliate more with Saudi, you know, Saudi Arabia, because that is where the history developed: from Iraq, from Saudi Arabia.

So when you think of Ummah, you think of Saudi Arabia?

Rummel: When I think of Ummah, I think of the Muslim population in general. When I think of Islam, and the roots of Islam, it goes back to the Prophet's time, that is where it originated, from Saudi Arabia. So my affiliation to Islam would be more toward Saudi Arabia rather than Bangladesh. Erm. In Bengali culture, I realize, when it comes to Islam, there's a lot of culture mixed with Islam and that is the discrepancy between the two. That is why I stay away from the cultural side of Bangladesh and more follow the roots from where it actually originated from, in Saudi. From my perspective.

If you have children you would bring them up as Muslims?

Rummel: I'm a Muslim myself so most... I would hope so, I mean, there is freedom of choice here, he he he.

Would you teach them Bangla, the language?

Shafi: I think for me, personally, it is quite important to have that connection with Bangla, to at least speak it as a minimum. But they would inherit a different background, so culturally it's not the same. Islam is important in terms of the development and the characteristics and what they believe in and the understanding of the words. It's important to distinguish Islam and Bangladesh, or Bengali culture, because regardless of what background you are from, you know, you have the choice. You can't choose to be Bengali: you're either born into a Bengali family or you're not. So erm, yeah, it's important to have a balance between these.

Interview 3: Ruman Ahmed (5)

22/10/2014

Location: Bar, Canary Wharf

Appointment through Diana Daruwalla, a friend of Shohef Sarang, one of my flatmates.
Ruman is her colleague.

You just said you sometimes check the weather reports in Sylhet. Is it recently that you've been there?

I haven't been for years. Not since I was three years old. It's been a long time.

And you're parents are from Bangladesh? They came here when they got married or?

No, my dad came here before he got married. Then he went back home, and met my mum, and they came back.

Do you have any recollection then from when you were there?

Yeah, because it was so long ago. You do remember certain things, you know, I remember what our house looks like and... I was there for the Eid celebration so I do remember that. Some things. But obviously not everything. If I'd go back now, I'm not sure if I'd be able to relate.

Do you still have family living there, do you have a recollection of that?

Yeah, still got family there, from both sides, more from my mum's side than from my dad's. I'd recognize them, but then, they probably look different. I see pictures of them so I think I would recognize them. Even if I would not have seen pictures I think I would still be able to recognize them but...

Your parents talk to them on the phone regularly?

Yeah. They be speaking quite regularly. I speak to them, not as much as my parents do, but I do speak to them.

What do you talk about then?

It's quite limited in terms what I can talk about with my cousins. I don't have the culture anymore. So it's restricted to "how are you", "how are things", "how's this", "how's that", "how's the land". More general questions.

Do they also keep you up-to-date with kind of what is happening in Bangladesh?

They keep my parents up-to-date. I guess that is how I would hear of what is happening there. It would get through to my through my parents, they'd tell me.

You live with your parents here? So you would hear it like that?

Yeah.

And do your parents stay up-to-date in other ways? Do they maybe like watch Bengali channels?

A bit too often, he he he. They watch kind of Bangla news channels, on a daily basis.

So they are still very much concerned with what is happening there?

Oh yes, absolutely. Definitely.

And does that affect you? Do you also try to stay up-to-date? Or does it have an opposite effect?

I do try and stay up-to-date. I probably won't use the same medium that they do, but I do keep track of what is happening in general. Major events, like if there's a cyclone, stuff like that. Those are things I want to keep myself aware of.

Like the elections in April, did you follow that?

Yeah, I did. That was obviously a big event, very controversial.

Did you follow it through British media or Bengali newspapers or ...?

I cannot read Bengali newspapers. My written Bengali and my reading Bengali isn't very good. I tend not to watch Bangla news channels, they don't speak to me very much. So I follow more like Western sort of media, and obviously social network sites. That sort of thing.

Are there a lot of people on your social networks that are from Bangladesh?

Well, I grew up around here. So this is, I guess, a quite concentrated area for Bengali people. Growing up, making friends...

Are they still your friends?

Yeah.

Do you speak to each other in Bengali?

It's a bit of both. I guess we don't do it consciously but we can switch a lot.

What do you speak with your parents?

With my parents I speak Bengali.

Does speaking the language help to maintain a kind of closeness to the culture?

Yeah, I think it definitely does. My personal opinion is that, I think that the kind of key to any culture is the language. So I do make a conscious effort to keep speaking Bengali. And I would want to pass it on.

Do you consider yourself Bangladeshi?

I don't know about Bangladeshi but I definitely consider myself to be Bengali. The difference I make is, whereas Bangladesh is a political state, Bengali is more, I guess, a tribe or a race. I definitely consider myself to be Bengali. Bangladeshi... nah, not really.

If people would ask you "Where are you from?", what would you say?

I think there's an answer for each different situation. It depends on what they want to know, whether or not they want to know where you grew up or what your genetic background is. Normally I ask which way do they mean, where I'm from, where I grew up... It's both I guess.

It seems that you're very conscious of those different identities.

Erm, I think it is more from experience, when people ask that question. Whether they want to find out where you properly live or sort of are more interested of your genetic background. So, having had the experience, I know people asking me questions could mean different things. I don't think I debate in my mind too much what I am.

And how important is being Muslim to you?

I find it very important. Probably the most important thing in my life.

You say you relate more to Bengal than to Bangladesh, but doesn't the difference between both also have to do with Islam?

Erm. I guess, I mean, my dad, when he was born and where he was born, I guess he would be sort of Indian, because at that time the whole subcontinent was Indian. And then, if he was born thirty years after he was, he'd be a Pakistani. And, I guess, if it was just forty years ago that he was born, he'd be Bangladeshi. So I guess, borders can change in time, but your race is not going to change.

Are you proud of your heritage?

I think I am.

[...]

Do you drink?

No, I don't, because I'm a Muslim. I was surprised when you said that you were not able to drink in Bangladesh. I haven't been there for a very long time and I just assumed they would have relaxed that sort of thing. I guess not in the region where I'm from, Sylhet, which is, from what I hear, still very conservative. But places like Dhaka, I'd thought they'd definitely changed. Especially because of the political meetings, I think they might be more secular-minded. So...

Do you consider Bangladesh a secular country?

From what I hear on TV and in the media, I think, it is quite. I think that relies on the two main political parties. I think the party in power, Awami League, has a very secular orientation, whereas BNP is far more traditionally orientated.

With whom do you talk about such things, Bangladeshi politics?

With my mates, mostly. My mates in general think of Bengal as their country. We grew up in large Bengali communities here. They tend to have that shared concern.

So at home you don't talk politics?

Erm. Mum mentions it sometimes, dad mentions it sometimes. But... I think there is a mindset gap between me and my parents. A generational thing. We don't talk about it that much. [...] But, I don't know, in terms of difference in opinion, I don't think there is a strong difference between my parents' generation and my generation. There might be kinda subtle differences, I guess. My generation is probably a little bit more liberal than my parents'. More reforming the tradition than it is a radical difference.

[...]

I think I hold my own views. I think there are certain things my parents have been sometimes too strict on, but I don't see myself... The secular movement in Bangladesh, I guess, it is very strong. Not as strong as continental Europe. Although we probably are as strongly secular, as driven as... I think we used to be more conservative and now we can be more relaxed. More traditional. Maybe a little bit less wound up about certain things.

THIRD WEEK

Interview 4: Salma Begum (6)

28/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar, Aldgate

Appointment through Mahmud (research outsider n° iii) and Aisha (research outsider n° vii), two of my flatmates, who were also present. Salma is Mahmud's colleague.

Ferjana (research outsider n° xii), another colleague, also present

I did a study tour in Bangladesh for my university. Among other cities, I went to Sylhet, where everyone I met was interested in moving to the UK.

Ferjana: Oh, yeah.

Salma: Obviously, ha ha ha.

So now I'm here trying to find out another side of that story. That is why I came here, I'm from Belgium so London is not really that far. I came here to talk to people who were born here and ask them some questions on how they still feel about Bangladesh.

Ferjana: Alright. I think she would know 'cause you're going, right?

Salma: Yeah, I might go... February. Just a little holiday. Do you know what it is, I just want to buy some pretty little dresses. You know, last time when I went I bought twenty salwar kameez.

Ferjana: Twenty? But you work here, you're always using like burka?

Salma: Yeah, but when I go to my mum's house, or my auntie's house, I just wear salwar kameez. 'Cause my dad, he doesn't like us wearing English clothes. Sometimes we do but just like, baggy clothes... Shit, is it recording? Aaaah! Ha ha ha.

Yes, but don't worry. I'll be the only one to ever listen to it. So you're looking forward to Bangladesh to shop?

Salma: Yes. He he he.

Ferjana: Only to shop?

Salma: No, just to see family and stuff. It's nice, 'cause I miss everyone there, I've got all my aunties and stuff, it's just nice. Did you get on their little three wheel cars?

Erm. Do you mean a rickshaw?

Salma: Yeah yeah yeah. I love it! It's a bit dangerous though.

Yeah, I've only been... are you from Sylhet?

Salma: Yeah.

Yeah, I only went on a rickshaw in Sylhet, because really, I was too afraid to do so in Dhaka.

Salma: Yeah, yeah. But when we do rickshaws, we do only like short little journeys.

What was the last time you went?

Salma: Three years ago, when my brother got married.

Your brother still lives there?

Salma: No. He just went back home to get married. Basically, the wedding talk happened here, yeah, and they started talking on the phone, texting and stuff. Then, when we went back home, we met the family, we just started converse. Then... He wanted to get married. Then her dad said, "OK let's go for it", then my parents said, "OK let's go for it", and we all booked our ticket last minute and we went, ha ha ha, for the wedding.

And how long did you go for?

Salma: Three weeks.

So you mostly go on holidays for about two, three weeks?

Salma: Yeah.

Do you only stay in Sylhet?

Salma: Just Sylhet, because, our house is in Sylhet, yeah.

So have you seen other parts of the country?

Salma: Erm, I have, like. Like have you seen ...? A little town? Like when we go to the village, that's when you realize you're in Bangladesh. The village is just, oh my god, it's just different. Like the guys all wear their long... lungi. Oh you know about that? Ha ha ha. Obviously, it's very traditional, innit? Over there it's different. Guys who'd be wearing their lungi, ladies with salmar kameez.

You never wore anything like that?

Salma: No, 'cause when I was over there, like, the thing is, when you're back home, and you wear English clothes, they just look at you, God, what is she wearing. And if you wear salmar kameez, they'd be like, you'd fit into the crowd.

Did you wear your hijab then?

Salma: No. I just started wearing it this year. Over there I was doing sort of fashion, doing curly hair, straight hair.

That is one thing I've noticed: in Bangladesh hardly anyone wears their hijab, except for in airports and stuff, but that is normal, to wear it when you are travelling. Whereas here, almost everyone wears it.

Salma: Yeah, and the funny thing is, that's a Muslim country. They don't even wear scarfs.

Ferjana: You know what. Because... I'm not from Sylhet, I'm from Dhaka, like my parents are from Dhaka. In Dhaka, they are not that religious, they would try to follow Indian culture. But in

Sylhet they are more conservative. What I feel, what I feel. And here, most of the population, most of the Bangladeshi population...

Salma: Most people are like, young people are like, packed into their religion now.

Ferjana: Yeah, but it's because you have that in your community as well.

Salma: Yeah yeah.

Ferjana: In the Sylheti community, they are very religious compared to non-Sylheti. And in Bangladesh like so many... In my family, there are few people who wear hijab.

You don't either.

Ferjana: No I don't. But in my view, that is different because I was born in France. It's different, we, it's very hard to wear hijab there. Here, you need it. I think it is part of the community to wear that. And if you don't, you are just...

Salma: Even, you can't even enter a mosque without wearing hijab. They'd be all like, girl, what are you doing, you have to cover yourself before you enter.

Ferjana: Yeah, yeah, that's true.

Salma: Yeah.

And how important is being Muslim for your identity? You said for example that you only started wearing your hijab this year.

Salma: Yeah, this year. Well, my family, they said that, because I got married to someone down in Whitechapel, that I now wear the scarf... But that's not really true. When I got married, like, nearly two years ago, I didn't wear it then. I did feel odd, because like everyone wears it here. I do feel odd, people looks at you and be like, like. Most of the Bengalis are like that. They just look at you and they just judge you. They just look at you!

Ferjana: Yes, and I think they think that... You don't get the same respect from people if you wear hijab or you don't wear hijab. I live in Seven Sisters, it's like North London, very few Bangladeshis, it's more like white people.

Was that a conscious choice, to stay somewhere where there are few Bangladeshis?

Ferjana: Ha ha ha, ha ha ha. The thing is that, because I'm from France, it's different, I don't have any Bangladeshi friends, because in Toulouse we were the first generation of Bangladeshis. And we're not used to too many Bangladeshis, because, in a way, our mentality is completely different. So... I would never live in Whitechapel, I think, I don't think I could.

Salma: I used to say that before I got married, never in my life [strong emphasis] I would get with someone that's from East! And move down to East. But things turned. Now I ended up living down here. In Banglatown. He he he.

Ferjana: Ha ha ha. Not the Banglatown, the Sylhetitown!

Salma: Just curry smell, curry smell, fish smell, fish smell, inside the buildings, the whole area is just curry smell.

You prefer fish and chips, then?

Salma: I actually like curry. Yeah. I do, you know.

But your own curry, not curry smell from all around?

Salma: Yeah, my own curry. But, the thing is, I'm used to it now, I said I didn't really like it, I used to say, "oh, I hate this", "I don't like this area", "I don't like the girls and the way they look at me". It took me literally seven months to actually settle down in this area. Because it's... Like the young girls, they would just look at you and be like...

Ferjana: Yeah yeah, I know.

Salma: It's just weird.

If they would ask you where you were from, what would you say?

Salma: From Bangladesh.

So, do you consider yourself Bangladeshi?

Ferjana: It depends. The thing is, what I think, if you ask me, where you are from, I would say I'm French, but if a Bangladeshi asks me, obviously I would say, I'm from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Because, most of the people here; born here Bangladeshi; when they ask you, where are you from, born here or born there, they just want to know from what part of Bangladesh.

Salma: What area, yeah.

Ferjana: So, yeah. If she asked me, I would say, I was born in France, my parents are from Bangladesh, Dhaka.

Salma: Mahmud's taking a long time, isn't he?

Ferjana: He just went to pick up his wife.

Yes, and when she called she had just left the house, that is why it's probably taking some time. So, as I was saying, do you consider yourself Bangladeshi? Or Sylheti?

Salma: If anyone were to ask me, I would just say I'm from Bangladesh. But the thing is, they don't really say that, they'd say, "are you from Dhaka or Sylhet?". Then I would say we're from Sylhet.

Ferjana: I don't know if you'd seen that but... Nothing against Sylheti or Dhaka, but, when you go to Sylhet, and the rest of Bangladesh, it's like two different worlds. It's kind of they have their own culture, they have their own things.

Salma: It's a bit more modern. Sylhet is not like other places. I don't know if you've seen that? It's really really different. Even if you go to Sylhetis here, there wouldn't be anyone with like, red hair. Or like blonde hair. No one would colour his hair! Before I went to Bangladesh, my dad was like, colour your hair before you go, I don't want you to put shame to my family. I couldn't believe it! But then I just understood what he meant, because, if I went there, with my red hair, everyone would just look at me like "ooooh!".

Ferjana: You had red hair?

Salma: Yeah, like proper red hair. And everyone would just look at you and think, oh my gosh, look at her, is that his daughter. They would just speak like that, like you're a bad girl.

Sylhetis are more judgmental?

Salma: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. I coloured my hair so many times.

Ferjana: Are you serious? [looks at the picture] I can't believe that, is that you!

Salma: There should be some more pictures... I'll show you it later, should be on my old phone.

Just red or other colours as well?

Salma: No, like, copper, brown, yeah. Bit of blonde. But, that was me before!

Ferjana: When was that?

Salma: Last year or two years ago on Eid day. Look, black hair. Yeah, sorry.

No, no, don't worry. I like the blonde hair.

Salma: He he. Yeah, yeah. I liked it. I do miss it. I might colour it again. But my hair isn't black now, I think it's... I don't know.

Ferjana: You don't remember?

Salma: Like a brownny colour.

Ferjana: She doesn't remember what her hair looks like!

Salma: It's like a brownny colour now...

You said that you missed the family back home. You still have a lot of family still living there?

Salma: Yeah. You know when you go back home, yeah, to your family, they just treat you like a princess. Like... they just treat you like a princess, 'cause you're from this country, they're like "oooh". It's just nice. It's just different and nice. Like, they do everything for you. Wake up in the morning, they even do your bed for you. They wash your clothes for you, clean, food... everything. [excited] Oh, that's Mahmud and his wife?

And do you talk regularly with your family on the phone?

Salma: Yeah, because, my mum, 'cause she went home last month.

Oh, and is she also going in February?

Salma: Yeah, she might, or she might stay. [to Aisha and Mahmud who just arrived] Hello, are you OK?

Ferjana: Do you want to sit down?

Aisha: Sorry I interrupted.

That's OK. We were just talking about Salma's family back home. You say, you now have more contact because your mum visited just recently?

Salma: Yeah. Because I wouldn't really call my cousins back home. There's really no point. No, no, no, not like that, ha ha. It's just like, you know, my Bengali, it's not really that good, so half the

time it's half English and half Bengali, and if I speak English, they'd be like, "what?". Ha ha. And I'd be like, "oh forget it".

Ferjana: Ha ha ha.

But your parents call regularly?

Salma: Yeah. They got family back there. So they usually make phone calls to back home.

And do you get like only family updates? Or do they also update you on the news, on what's happening in Bangladesh?

Salma: No... just family. Like my dad, he watches the, erm, Bangla channel. Yeah. But I don't. We don't have it in my home.

But you used to, at home with your parents?

Salma: Yeah, at home, when my dad used to watch it, like, just sit there, and just watch. But I'm not interested. Maybe because I'm from here and... I'm not that interested.

So you wouldn't like get one of the Sylheti newspapers?

Salma: Oh, no. I don't even know how to read Bengali. No way.

If there is something bigger happening, maybe also in British news, like Rana Plaza last year, or this year, the elections in April, would you follow that.

Salma: No. I just see it as... You know, there is no point, because I'm from here. Does that make sense?

And your husband, does he feel the same way?

Salma: He's not Bengali.

Oh! So you moved here, to Whitechapel, but you didn't marry a Bengali?

Salma: Exactly, that's the weird thing about it. So I should've been from here and he should've been from where I was, Brixton. Yeah. But he's more into it than me, because he grew up in this area. Like all his friends are Bengali, he loves his curry, and fish. And I don't know how to cook fish. I just know, chicken, beef. Ha ha ha.

You should ask Mahmud to cook, he's really good.

Salma: Oh he's really really good, I love his biryani!

Mahmud: What?

Ferjana: Ha ha ha.

[...]

Salma: I don't think I would stay in Bangladesh for more than one month. I think I would get fed up. I think two week, three weeks is like max for me.

Ferjana: Whenever we go, we go for like two months.

Salma: Oh no, I would die.

Ferjana: It's too much.

Salma: I would die.

Ferjana: You know, because in France we have two months summer holiday, so we go for two months, and the weather is just so...

Salma: Oh yeah! You can't even wear make-up! Ha ha ha. At my brother's wedding, we were like... They wanted to put so much on. And I was like, no, I can't do this, I won't do this, I can't even put my own make-up on. And the mosquitoes. I had one there, on my leg. And the heels. I can't do this.

Ferjana: He he he. And the thing is, you need to wear, like, heavy stuff for it, and you just sweat so much.

[...]

Do you know a bit about Bangladeshi politics?

Salma: No, no, nothing, you know. I think. Mahmudur, you would know? He would definitely know.

Or the history?

Salma: Don't know nothin', sorry.

It's OK, that's actually interesting.

Salma: He he he. I don't know nothing.

Mahmud: [about his wife Aisha, who is American] She knows more than you guys.

Salma: Ho ho ho ho.

[...]

And who are you looking forward the most to see them back?

Salma: Erm. My cousins that I went shopping with, my cousins that helped at my brother's wedding, it's just them.

And your brother is also going?

Salma: Yeah, he might go, we're not really sure, you know everyone has got work problems, with holidays and stuff. But my dad really wants us to go together, 'cause it's nicer when the whole family goes together. If one person goes, like, by himself, it's just really really boring. And he doesn't want one of us going by ourselves, because he feels really protective. You never know what would happen if a girl went by herself. Even if a girl went shopping by herself.

Really, like in those large shopping malls, it's not safe?

Salma: Yeah. It's not. Well, like, my dad, he doesn't like us going by ourselves. And roughly, this country, like, anything could happen...

They would see that you're not from there?

Salma: Yeah, yeah. Apparently they would just realize. Even when we used to go shopping, my cousins would be like, “you guys don’t speak, we do all the talking”. Like when we used to go and buy all dresses and stuff, a dress for like 80 pounds, they would lie and tell us, like, “100 pounds”. So what they do, they put the price up! So my cousins would be like, “we’ll do all the talking”.

I know you can’t read Bangla anymore, but can you still speak it.

Salma: Erm. Ask him, [to Mahmud] do you think my Bengali’s ok?

Mahmud: You don’t talk Bangla, you talk Sylheti.

Salma: What?

Mahmud: Sylheti, not Bangla.

Ferjana: That’s true. I can’t understand if you speak it.

Salma: I think it’s ok, I don’t think it’s bad.

Mahmud: 90% of the things you say, I can’t understand.

Ferjana: I can’t understand either.

Mahmud: We speak Bangla, you speak Sylheti.

Ferjana: Exactly. You don’t understand our Bangla, do you?

Salma: A little.

Mahmud: We have the same problem when you talk. We understand very little. We just see your mouth moving.

Salma: Ha ha ha.

If you had kids, would you teach them some Bangla?

Salma: Definitely. They have to know their mother tongue.

Why is that?

Salma: Erm. I think it’s just good, if they know their mother tongue. I would teach it as a second language, English would be first. Especially in this country.

Ferjana: Three languages for me, also French.

That’s ok, I speak five.

Salma: [excited] Oh, do you speak Bengali?

No, no, I just know *Shuvo Nobo-borsho*.

Mahmud: She doesn’t even know what that is.

Ferjana: It’s happy new year!

Salma: Oh!

Ferjana: Maybe Sylhetis say it in a different way.

Salma: Yeah, they do.

Ferjana: How do you say it?

Salma: I don't know.

That's weird, because I was in Sylhet the day before new year's and they taught it to me.

Salma: I don't know. Maybe you should've asked someone else to do this [interview].

No, no, really, it's perfect though, I'm very happy.

Ferjana: Ha ha, perfect. Literally she's Bangladeshi but she doesn't know anything about it.

But it's interesting, because you still want to pass it on to your children.

Salma: Basically, I would love my kids to speak Bengali, because I'm Bengali. I don't want them thinking, because they are brought up in this country, I don't want them to think they're English. I want them to know where they are from, because I'm from there. My husband's Turkish. I would prefer them speaking Bengali than Turkish. Yeah, I would.

Mahmud: Turkish, that's Arabic?

Salma: No, it's Turkish.

It's a different language.

Salma: Yeah.

Does your husband agree with that?

Salma: He doesn't want them learning Turkish, especially the area that we're living in.

Because of his Bengali friends growing up?

Salma: Yeah.

For you, what is the difference between Bengali and Bangladeshi?

Salma: Oh, erm, Bengali, I don't know. Like, maybe I don't say Bangladeshi because that's just a country. I just say Bengali.

Ferjana: I think Bengali is just English for Bangladeshi, because in France we say Bangladeshi. But normally, Bengali, I think it's the language.

Aisha: I thought it was Bangla.

In any case, thank you for this interview, I'm very happy with it.

Salma: Are you sure? Ha ha ha. Say the truth, come on.

Interview 5: Kolsuma Begum (7)

29/10/2014

Location: Kolsuma's (father's) shop on Watney Market, Aldgate

Appointment through Aisha (viii), one of my flatmates. Aisha goes to Kolsuma's shop often.

!IMPORTANT REMARK! This conversation was not recorded and later on transcribed, as the other. Instead, it was written down during the interview itself.

You were born here in London?

Uh huh. 33 years ago.

Where are your parents from? Were they also born here?

They were born in Bangladesh. I think, yeah, they were born in Sylhet.

Have you ever visited Bangladesh?

Yes, once... three times. Once when I was three, four; then when I was seven; and then when I was twentyseven.

So last time was six years ago?

Yes.

What was your impression?

As a kid you just think, you think it's just a holiday, you go there. But as I grew older, I just felt as if I had no attachment to it. I mean, you reminisce, Oh I came through this street and I did this and I did that, but I have no attachment. I don't know what it is. My sister went also, but she has a deep attachment to the place. Oh, I want to go back, I really want to go. And she's only two years older than me. I just can't see what she can see.

Do you still have contact with the family members you visited?

I only have a grandma, but I think she's senile. You know, I live here, she lives there. If I would go back, I'd think I'd look forward to seeing the servant more than anyone. I still talk about her till this day. She's amazing.

You still have contact with her?

No, because she doesn't have a phone... Letters are too much of a hassle, you need to pay to go collect it. But my mum went two, three years ago, so she said hello and all that stuff.

Do your parents still keep in touch?

Not through people, but they're always stuck to the telly, watching the news about what's happening thousands of miles away. I mean, focus on your country, where you're living in, but no, they always got these Bangladeshi channels on.

You don't like them?

Not that I don't like them, I just don't see how that's relevant to our lives anymore. There's no point in getting upset about the prime minister and what he's about to do, because you don't live there anymore. If we were to go back, that would be a different thing, but we don't.

For example, if something like Rana Plaza happens, do you pay extra attention?

Utterly, how I felt about it, yes, I felt sorry. But it could've happened everywhere, it could've happened in France, So yes I sympathize. It would be different if it was here. 'Cause it is home. Does that make sense?

It does.

Yes, you sympathize more, because they're very poor, but I wouldn't go and... I don't know, does that sound selfish? I would give charity, I would do that, but I do that, because you do that, you give to the poor, because they're struggling, I'd give but I don't feel anything more. Makes me sound really selfish, god.

If someone were to ask you, where are you from, what would your answer be?

From London.

Do you still consider yourself Bangladeshi, being born here?

Yeah. People do ask me, where are you from, oh London, but no, your parents, ah yes, Bangladesh. Even if I haven't got any feelings for the country, I still consider myself a Bangladeshi, in London, in Britain.

Do you know Bangla? Or Sylheti? Do you still speak it?

I communicate with my siblings in English, and with my parents in Bengali. I can read and write, being taught from the age of four or five.

If you had children, would you teach them Bangla?

I don't have any children, I have a nephew, I mean I have nieces and nephews, but him, I teach him numbers in English and Bengali. I think it is important to get a balance of both. But I think the balance is still more English-focused. [...] It's because he listens to me and his mum talking, she speaks very little English, so I need to communicate with her in Bengali. And he just listens to us. And he understands everything that we're saying, but he won't communicate in Bengali, he would just talk in English. And he'd be like, what does this word mean? Because he wouldn't be able to follow anymore if he gets stuck on one word.

Are you proud of your heritage?

Hmmm. I'm not sure. My dad's always talked about the war, and the British invaded. But I guess I just never paid any interest. I guess in a way I'm not proud, because people in Bangladesh are very corrupt, and I don't want to be associated with that. Otherwise I'm not really bothered from where I'm from. When I mean corrupt, I mean the bribery attached to it... I think it was once mentioned on telly, the world's most corrupt country is Bangladesh, I said, I don't want to be attached to that. A couple of years back, I was really unhappy with my name and so on. I think now, I've come to terms with that. I think I've matured a little.

You said your dad mentioned history and the war and so on.

He used to when we were growing up, he stopped now.

So you do know a little bit of the history?

Yeah. [...] I just realized that what my dad taught me as a kid, I just realized that I do the same with my nephew, but I teach him the history of England. I just realized that.

How important is being Muslim to you?

Erm. It wasn't very important to me, say again, a few years ago, but now, I think, I've been turning into my religion a bit more. I realize it is not just about praying, it is about communicating with the people around you, I want to be a better person, I want to be a nice person. But my patience has been really drawn thin working here [in a shop], because people ask really stupid questions, and I just think, hold your tongue, hold your tongue.

You said that it happened just a few years back, is there a special reason for that? What was the occasion or something that happened?

I split up from somebody and I just turned to religion.

Would you say that your Muslim identity is more important than your Bangladeshi?

Oh yeah. We were always thought that religion comes first, before your race.

Do you associate Bangladesh with Islam?

No.

When you think of Ummah, what do you think about?

I honestly think of people, sounds really stupid, but all the people, no matter what race, but we're all following the same religion, and I can just picture it, everyone in the same direction. Why can't we be like that every day, communicating like that every day of our lives? [...] One of the reasons why I turned to religion is that I wanted to be a better person. Being spiritual. I felt happy. I feel happy now.

Do you have other friends who have Bangladeshi roots?

I've never had any Bengali friends growing up. I went to a covert school, most of them were Bengali, but when I quit school, that was it, I didn't I think I just didn't like what they have to offer. Communicating in Bengali, that's so rude, when other people are there. In most places people do that, and I just find it so rude. In a school session, I've been to many school sessions, and they do the same, they don't want to be part of English stuff, talking Bengali, that's not right. I don't want to be associated with that.

Interview 6: Afchana Begum (8)

30/10/2014

Location: Youth Centre, Bow

Appointment through Salman Shams (iv), a friend of Mainuddin Shuvro (iii), an acquaintance I have made through couchsurfing.org and with whom I met up in week 1. Salman is a youth worker and Afchana's colleague.

Thanks for wanting to talk to me. I don't know if [our mutual friend] Salman already said something?

No problem. He just said you wanted to interview me about things.

So, basically, I went to Bangladesh in April. I went to Sylhet, among other places. I don't know if you're from there?

Well, I'm from Sunamgoinj, which is basically down. Well, my family's from Sunamgoinj, so it's basically just down below.

Same province?

Sort of.

Have you visited Bangladesh?

I have, twice, but I was a baby pretty much. So '94, and '96 was the last time. So that was... I don't know how many years, I think 18+ years ago.

Any plans to go again?

No... I highly doubt it. Unless maybe when I'm married, so if I go with my husband, just a holiday, if [strong emphasis] he is Bengali. If he's not, then it's different, I could go to his country. I have family back there but I don't really see it as a holiday location.

You don't associate Bangladesh with holidays, what do you associate it with?

Just a country where I originated from. I don't have the best experience with family or Bangladesh. [...] I don't really have the best experience with family, friends, people from Bangladesh. I don't associate it with like, good times.

Do your parents stay in contact with the family back there?

Erm. My dad died last year. Erm, he had siblings back home, which is also another conflict, erm... we don't get along with them. My mum has siblings back home in Bangladesh as well, she contacts them, communicates with them, they're all fine. My... brother-in-law has also got family... So, two of my sisters are married, and their husbands... My eldest brother-in-law has a sister back home, he also... he wants to go but, to be honest, there's not really a reason to go because his parents and other sisters are here. My other brother-in-law, the majority of their family is back home in Bangladesh because he came here as a student and then, communicated with... basically, my sister got married, and he became a British citizen. With me, it's a different story. I don't plan on getting married to anyone back home.

Like the traditional trip you take home again just to get married?

No no no no, my sister's didn't do that. They were here. It's a bit of family issues, erm, personal issues, that my sisters got married to someone from Bangladesh, but otherwise, I think, if they did find British born males here, erm, they would've I think got married to them, but it's just a family thing, that something happened that they couldn't so they got married to... But, you know, they are happy. They're fine. That's the most important thing.

Would your mother agree if you were to marry someone who was not Bengali?

My mum would be fine with it, she used to tell me when I was younger, said if I had a boyfriend or anyone... get married to them. As long as they're Muslim, that's what she asked, Muslim. She said preferably not Pakistani because of the Pakistani-Bangladeshi divide. But other than that she'd be perfectly happy for me to marry anyone who was Muslim, whether they be white, black, Chinese, anything ... You know, she said it would be easier if he were Bengali, because of the culture and everything like that, but she said she has not really a preference, just as long as I'm happy. But, to be honest, I don't really mind who it is. When the time comes, the time will come, when the person comes along, they'll come along.

Do you consider Bengali culture your culture?

Yeah. Do you want to pause that for a second? I just want to close the door. Continue. Yeah, I'm British born Bengali, I have Bengali culture in me, but I'm religiously Muslim born in a western society so... You know, I follow a bit of everything really. So I'm not a typical Bengali, traditional, like in their terms of that, you know, like their culture is, Bengali culture is like get married when you're young and have kids and there's certain things you do... My mum has obviously evolved, coming to this country, learning the ways, you know. My sisters, the eldest one, back in them days, obviously, times were different, so she did get married when I think she was about 19-20. But, my other sister she got her degree, she got educated. And there's only six years between them. So my sister, the second one, she got married when what, she was about 24-25. She is still young, she's got 2 kids. My other sister, she got married when she was 24-25 as well, she doesn't have kids. My brother as well. Like, four of us, out of six, all got degrees. My eldest sister, she got married quite young, but she's T.A. so she's doing quite well for herself. And I got a 20-year old niece, she's doing quite well as well, she works for a big company in HR, she hasn't got her degree yet but she's gonna, she's taking a year off, like a gap year, for experience. But erm, who else? My brother, yeah, we've all got degrees. They're all married, I'm the last one basically, to get married.

Your family seems really important to you.

Yeah. Erm. Primarily my family, and I've got a very big... See, with me, as a Bengali, not even as a Bengali, just generally, my family, we're very family-orientated, we speak to all of, pretty much all of the family, whether there's ups and downs, you still communicate with one another. Just family, family. Family values, basically.

Do you feel the same way about family members who still live in Bangladesh?

Them, they are my family, but... If I don't have communication with them, it's obviously not as import-- it is important, like, obviously, they are my family, I will support them in any way that I can, whether it's financially or morally or... however. But, erm, I see that -- 'cause they're not, obviously -- I don't have a bond with them, because of when I was, what, five, when I went, when I last saw them, that was the last time I remember them. Occasionally, they do make a phone call here and there, they do say, "how are you?", "how's life?" -- it's general. A two minute conversation.

General, just family matters or do you also keep up-to-date with the country?

Not really. It's a corrupt country. Full stop.

At home, do you ever watch Bengali news channels?

Oh no, we're more into the more Indian channels. Indian culture, Indian soaps. I understand Hindi better than I do Bengali.

Really?

I speak five languages. Fluent in Bengali, English and Hindi – I can't write it, or read it, apart from English. I can speak Spanish and French as well, a little bit. I studied French and Spanish in school. French I did for three years, Spanish I did for five. I know the basic words, and swearing. Ha ha ha. When you're a teenager, that's the first thing you pick up. That's how you pick up languages, I think, swearing at each other. And watching -- erm, I used to watch, erm, Spanish shows here and there, so I do pick up a lot of words.

You said Bangladesh is a corrupt country. Do you follow anything that--?

I do follow bits and bobs, you know, like the president... Hartal is basically, you know, like the fights they were having, 'cause I remember, when my dad died and they took him back home, because, obviously, he's back and forth from Bangladesh. But when he, because he had cancer, he was here, and when he died he wanted to be buried back home. So my mum, my brother and my uncle, they took him, and they were like, oh, yeah so much corruption, that you had to pay someone off for an ambulance to get to the village where he was going to be buried. And lots of other stuff, yeah. And lots of -- yeah, and if you pay the right people, they get stuff, like, they paid some policemen off to escort them and. Just all of this stuff. And I'm there thinking, "well" ... And they see it, like, oh, Lond-- you know, British people or London, people from London are coming, you know, they have extra cash and they're happy to "bend the rules". And I'm thinking, "that's not right". But they're willing to do it. My family are not going back any time soon though, he he, you know.

And you aren't either, like you said?

To be honest, I wouldn't have even gone back then, even -- My mum said I'm not allowed. There's a lot of corruption in Bangladesh and she said, because I did want to go on holiday, like back in 2008 or 9, just before I was going to start my degree, so I said, let's go for a summer holiday, let's go for a family holiday, and, you know, see the country and stuff -- we'd have to go to the villages so the family will not -- like, my sister, when she got married, 'cause her husband is like from a family of ten, and the majority of his siblings are back home -- he's from Sylhet so he's a city boy -- and he said, "yeah, let's go". They literally just came back on the 25th of Octobre from a, from a month in Bangladesh. She's quite lucky, you know, she's -- her husband does not stay just in the village, he goes, you know, Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar, he takes her around the country, you know, he takes, he takes her -- she's been pretty much all over the world, her husband is quite outgoing. He's got family in Austria, America... everywhere basically. You know, he's quite -- traveller.

So, if you were to ever go back to Bangladesh, you would also like to visit those places?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's what I wanted to do! I didn't want to go to see family or village, I said, "if we are going, Mum, you can go to the village and go see them but I'm not going to come with you, I don't have to come with you". You know, 'cause she's a little scared that people would like kidnap me --

In the village?

Yeah, in the village – kidnap me, marry me, and do like, black magic blablabla.

Like a kobiraj?

Yeah, all of that stuff. You know about it?

I met a kobiraj in Bogra while we were doing our research on health services there. He treated patients with herb medicine and read some lines from Qur'an.

No no no, the Qur'an is not... See, this is where you are getting confused. Someone using the Qur'an to heal you, it is different, spiritual. It's right, it's fine. But kobiraji is basically when they do -- Do you believe in genies? Spirits? You know, like in Islam, there's three plains. So there's afterlife, this life, and there's a life in between, so: ghosts. Ghosts and genies are alike. Limbo, basically, yeah. So. And they are all around us. It, it, it – you know, christians, Muslims, jews, we all believe this. And I think hindus do too, because they have kobiraj as well, but it's called something else, I can't remember what it is called. So... what they is basically, they contact the genies, using people's bone and graves and they offer... It's like satanic, almost. Satanic, basically. So kobiraj is that, it's satanic, it's black magic. Whereas someone reads the Qur'an or recites a prayer, it's like almost a prayer from the Bible or the Thora or the Qur'an. They would basically, that is just basically just saying, "God heal them, God heal them", it's just like a prayer basically, that's all it is, asking God to help heal you, miracles do happen. So that's, that's what that is. So that's not – you know.

They told us he was a kobiraj...

I don't know, basically, because that part of the country... I am Sylheti. I speak, like, basically, East London and they speak, erm... Queen. He he. If you want to put it in that sense. Like, they speak posh and we speak, you know, slang language. So that's where it comes from and yeah, basically... The difference. [Soft voice] So she was scared of that, she did not take me back home. And she, yeah, and she didn't let my brothers go back home as well because, yeah, I guess they do that to them as well. But they're married so it's fine, they can't do that.

If you read or you see anything about Bangladesh in British headlines --

To be honest, there hasn't been much, has there? I'm not really one to keep up with news, it's really bad. I just listen to the radio occasionally when I'm driving, but usually, I just plug my music in.

But like, for example, Rana Plaza, did you hear about that?

Oh yeah, yeah, I heard about that, yeah yeah yeah, my brother told me about that and stuff like that. That doesn't give Bengalis a good name, that gives them a worse name.

If you hear something like that, do you look for it?

Not really keen on Bangladesh itself, so, like, yeah... I personally see it as, yeah, I'm Bengali, I'm cult-- I'm from the Bengali culture, I'm ethnically Bengali. But I'm British born. So if anyone goes to me and ask, "where are you from?", I'd be like, "Britain". If someone were "where are you ethnically from?" – that's a valid question, you can say where I am ethnically from to someone, where I'm from, because I am technically from Britain. Yes, I'm first generation British born Bengali. But I, you know, I'm a British... person. I've got British culture in me as well as my Bengali heritage and my Islamic faith.

Is there a difference between Bangladeshi and Bengali to you?

Erm. I think so, yeah. 'Cause Bangladeshi, I think, I'd say, as they're from Bangladesh, like my Mum, she used to be Bangladeshi but she's been in this country for 30 years and she's finally a British citizen, so therefore she's a Bangladeshi British now. He he. You know, she used to have a green passport all these years, because she never saw it as a necessity to get a British passport. But now, obviously, times have changed, laws have changed, she goes, "I need a British passport now". And she's automatically qualified to be a British citizen because she's been here for thirty plus years. You know. All her children are British, 'cause my dad was Briti-- well, he wasn't born British obviously, he was brought over here to do work, labour, he was a labourer, so... By the Queen people. So he automatically was given a British passport. So we all were British. Just my Mum wasn't. But she was married to a British man. But her kids are British, so she's ideally British.

How important is your religion for your identity?

Very important. Obviously, it is not important to this sense-- it is important for myself. I don't think religion defines a person, like it doesn't define a person to the external world, like I don't wear a hijab. I'm quite modern in that sense that, you know, I practice my religion in my own time, in my, in my own way. So my religion, I'm not a lot about it, I'm not ready to be... There's certain things I'm not ready for personally, just personal development. I think when I'm ready for it I will fully commit as a practicing Muslim. At the moment I am still practicing, learning. You know, knowledge is key: I still want to know the full extent of my religion. But I am-- I believe in God and I believe... the way I practice my religion is the way of Islam, so...

Do you think it is more important than your Bengali heritage?

It's really and truly the same thing, because, erm, Bengali culture and religion, they do clash occasionally. But obviously, we would go more for the religious side sometimes. Sometimes the cultural side. It depends how important it is to my Mum or family members, and stuff like that. But it's one and the same, really. I see myself as, I'm three-in-one: British Bengali Muslim.

Do these three clash sometimes?

Sometimes it can clash. Sometimes, really, like, you know, it's really about your morals and ideologies, I think personally, 'cause my Mum has told me certain things I can and can't do, those are inherited within me, that are still in within me, like being modest, you know, erm, speaking respectfully, being humble, being hospitable to anyone and everyone that comes to your door. You know, even if you don't know them, you'd serve them a cup of tea and you're polite... Obviously times have changed and you wouldn't open your door for a stranger, but if they knew you and they're a family friend, you'd welcome them into your home. That's a Bengali thing I think, that's not really islamic. It is sort of. Islam and Bengali culture emerged over the years I think, because Bengali culture used to be more Hinduism, you know, more of the Hindu traditions and stuff like that. Of course, that's still within the culture. Because. You know, they were one and the same country, it's just, they will obviously-- you know, they've divided now after the independence but still, still they're the Hindi culture, the Pakistani culture, they're all one and the same, we just have different ways of the religion and the practices; that's all it is. It's one and the same I personally think.

And that continues in your British identity?

Yeah, of course, you know. British... I personally think British culture is not really a focused culture, there's not much to it, that's where I prefer my Bengali culture over British culture but I am British in the sense that, you know, I'm not, I'm born in Britain, London, I have my education level that to people, to some Bengalis, like in the village-- because you know, my Mum's from the

village, so is my Dad, education is not important to them. Whereas in this country, education is key, you know, getting a job, securing financially, a home... That, I think, that's where it comes from, British culture, having that kind of, as some would say, "white life". So like having, basically, your kids grow up, they get married, move out, you know, have their own house, you know, mortgages... I think that is where the British culture comes into the Bengali culture. It's sort of a clash, it's not really a clash really, it's more of a merge now. It's become... unite. Together.

Do you think living in a city as big as London contributes to all of this?

Of course, and I love living in London, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else in London, erm, anywhere else in the UK, because, like in London it's so multicultural, there's so many different faces, so many different types of people. You know, in one face there'd be like five different-- like about ten thousand cultures. You know, Islam is so multicultural, it's one religion, but you've got like people from China, Africa, Middle East, America, kinda, everywhere, Australia; there's Muslims all around the world. And we're all culturally different, ethnically different, we practice it in a similar or different-- all in all I can say, "yes, they are my Muslim brothers and sisters over the world." That's I think where religion and culture come clashing and come together.

FOURTH WEEK

Interview 7: Jamshid Alam (9)

3/11/2014

Location: Youth Centre, Bow

Appointment through Salman Shams (iv), a friend of Mainuddin Shuvro (iii), an acquaintance I have made through couchsurfing.org and with whom I met up in week 1. Salman is a youth worker and Jamshid's colleague.

I'm gonna be asked questions about Bangladesh?

Yes.

I hardly know anything about Bangladesh. 'Cause I'm half Asian, half white, my mum's white. I've only been like three times.

Was that a long time ago?

Yeah, it was quite a while ago, yeah.

Were you there for several weeks?

Only one week. I can't hack it there. It's too much. Ha ha.

Why's that? What's your impression of the country?

Just in general, 'cause we're not used to it, we're more used to more like, Britain, that's what I mean. It's a different place, a different lifestyle.

So you were born here, in London. In East London?

Erm, yeah, East London.

And your dad's born in Bangladesh?

My dad was born back home, back east, he's come to this country when he was about... 20? 21, 22?

Was he still studying then?

Yeah, he was still studying then.

And where exactly is he from? What city?

From Dhaka.

Last time you went, how old were you then?

I went back in 2011, I think.

Do you still have contact with your dad's family members you visited there?

What, from here? No-- not really. Sometimes they do call and ask me to talk, so not... I wouldn't say it's like often.

When they do call, do they update you just on family matters?

Oh, just in general, how I am and what I'm doing, stuff like that.

Do they sometimes talk about what is happening there in Bangladesh?

Not really, to be honest. Because... I don't see why they would, to be honest, talk about that. If they did, then it would be with my Mum and my Dad.

Do you personally, to a certain extent, stay up-to-date with what's going on?

Stay up-to-date? Well, yeah, sometimes, we are still up-to-date with what is happening back home, we own a couple of properties back home, so we are updated on how it is, what's going on, stuff like that.

For example, the elections in April, do you know about that?

No...

Or big things, that are also brought into British news, like Rana Plaza last year? Do you follow that a bit?

Nope... not really. He he.

Do you still connect to Bangladesh?

Connected? Not really, no. 'Cause I'm a bit of both. But I feel more like I belong here than there, but obviously that's like my Dad's country as well so... Not much, just a bit.

If someone were to ask you, where are you from, what would your answer be?

No, I would say, Bangladesh, because obviously, I do follow like the Asian trend. But I would say what I am, and if I'm mixed or one culture.

Your Mum's from Britain?

Yeah.

Do you know Bangla? Do you still speak it?

I do, but not a lot. Not a lot. I do speak some with my brothers and sisters.

Can you read it?

No.

If you had children, would you teach them Bangla?

Yeah, well, it depends who I'm married to be honest. See, if I'm married to a non-Asian or a non-Bengali, then I don't know. See, they all know bits and bobs of it but yeah.

Is that important to you, to marry someone who's Bengali? Or Asian?

No, not really. It's, erm, it's not up to me. It's like, whoever I'm happy with. That's what my parents will be happy with.

Would it be important to have the same religion?

Well, not really. They don't have to. But, obviously, sometimes... You can marry someone who is not in the same religion as you but sometimes they tend to choose, like after you're married, they tend to choose that religion. They want to be like their husbands. 'Cause when you're married, you're a couple, you're a team. So yeah. You don't want to be two different people, that's just weird.

How important is being Muslim to you?

Well, it's... It is really important 'cause, as far as I'm concerned, the knowledge I have of being a Muslim is like, it's the actual religion that, you know, every culture knows about and every religion knows about. So we do... we do... We are mentioned in every Holy Book that there is.

When you consider Ummah, what do you think about? Do you relate Bangladesh to Islam, for example?

Not really, because it's not... It is a Muslim country and it is a Bengali country... It's just like, we're in Britain, you wouldn't say that it's a Christian country. It's not. Because you've got so many different religious people living here. So not really, no.

Are you proud of your heritage?

Meaning?

Like do you identify with Bangladesh? Do you consider yourself Bengali?

Do I consider myself Bengali? Yeah, I do, but, sometimes when I go into, say, events and stuff, for like, for work, anything, I really, I love it, I'd say, "I'm Asian, I'm Bengali." But I do mix with other cultures as well. It's a bit of both for me. I wouldn't just be myself, I would mix with other people. And yeah. And if I live in a community full of Bengalis, then yeah, I do talk to a lot of people.

So you have a lot of Bengali friends?

Yeah, a lot. Ha ha. Well, a bit of both, to be honest.

Do they ever talk about what is happening back in Bangladesh?

To be honest, erm, like, obviously, the life, the, erm, the year I was born in and the friends I have, it's really different. We tend to focus on here rather than back home, we hardly have any knowledge of what's going on back home. Not 'cause we don't wanna know, it's cause, you know, what's, what're we gonna gain from knowing what's happening back home?

Interview 8: Ahmed (10)

3/11/2014

Location: Ahmed's fast food restaurant, All Saints

Appointment through Mahmud (i), one of my flatmates.

Mahmud sometimes goes to his fast food restaurant.

Thank you for taking the time off work for this interview.

No problem. Could you tell me what's it about?

The interview will be mostly about whether or not you follow some news about what is happening back in Bangladesh.

OK, yeah hello, you can ask me whatever you wanna ask. Go on. About the thing erm... I don't keep up with Bangladesh, well, I do keep up, I got family members living there, and any serious news they'd let me, let us know and that's it at the moment. Yeah, like, but we do obvious-- like, family, I do visit... Like last time I went was 2007, stayed over for about a month. Then again I went, before that I went 2006, stayed for about 16 days, it was a marriage, my family member's marriage, went there, had a quick, erm, thing and come back. And the last I went, I was young. I went twice, but I was so young, with my parents.

So you went four times in total?

Four times, yeah.

And you were born here in East London?

Born in London Hospital. Yeah.

And your parents were also born here?

Nah, my parents are born in Bangladesh. And, they're born in Sylhet, in the village, yeah. And I'm not sure when he did come but he came a very long time ago in London, yeah. He came in, got his work, then he got, he went back home again, got married, got his wife – my Mum – and obviously, when they got back, and me and my brothers and sisters were born here.

Do you still have contact with family members who still live in Sylhet?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, everyone's in contact with us. 'Cause my cousin brother went recently, he got married, he went there. You know, we always got contact. My dad's got his village, his, his dad's house, he's got, he's got his whole background there basically. We do go there. It's like... we go all the time, not me but one of my family member goes.

You said they keep you up-to-date on like the big things that are happening?

Big things, like, erm, I don't know, nothing happens in our village, to tell you the truth. Big things about the politics, I don't go into them stuff. That's my thing, I don't, erm, I'm not politics or nothing. But I do hear from other guys talking, this happened, that happened. But other than that... From my family members, no one's on politics anyway. Erm. But, if anything happens,

they'd just let us know, "that's happening", "today's gonna be riots happening", like, the roads are closed, we ain't gonna go the... city. Yeah.

Is that important to you?

It is important 'cause a lot of things happen in riots, apparently. Not us lot, our family, but in the newspapers they show, someone passed away, the police picked them up, and it's shocking to see, because if something like that were happening here, we'd be fuming, like, we're in London, if something happens like this, we'd be like shocked. And the same thing happens in Bangladesh, obviously, we are shocked, but obviously we can't do nothing much. It's the government who could do anything, or anyone else, whoever's got the power in their hands. That's what it is, what my opinion is, yeah.

Do you discuss this with other people here in East London?

We do discuss it, but obvious-- the guys that I speak to, they ain't got no power as well. Erm. Like me, a normal British citizen born in this country, they just do their work, look after their family. Obviously, we do talk, but we can't... There's no action. We just talk, like "Oh man, did you see that? I hope something gets better, man, somebody comes out forward and does something, whoever's got the power in their hand". That's what we keep saying. Yeah.

Do you feel frustrated?

It is frustrating, obvious. Like, it's your own country. Obviously, I ain't born in my, in my parents' country but end of the day it's our country as well. But it still is, it's part of the... thing. Anyway, any day we go, we still think, like, now, when I told them, I do joke with, erm, my colleagues [Ahmed owns a number of hamburger tents close to All Saints], they're from Bangladesh as well, few of them are my cousins as well; yeah. And tell them all, like, "what's happening now, are they arresting anyone?", "Yeah, that's what's happening." Do you hear me?

If someone were to ask you, "where are you from?", what would you say?

Erm. London. And my parents are from Bangladesh. That's what I normally say.

Do you still consider yourself Bangladeshi?

I am a Bangladeshi, erm, a British citizen Bangladeshi. Bangladeshi, yeah.

And how does that identification come about?

Identification, basically, my parents are from Bangladesh and I was born in this country, I'm a British citizen, but end of the day, my parents' country, where they were born, is my country as well. Yeah, that's what it is.

And you speak Bangla?

Yeah, I speak Bangla. Yeah. That's my first language. Second language is English. Yeah.

You can read it as well?

Yes, I do read it.

Do you pick up the newspapers they pass out at East London Mosque?

I do pick up the newspaper now and again, yeah, but again, I don't go into politics. Then again, the newspaper, in my opinion, a lot of things... Faults, they put faults in. Yeah, there's lots of things, they say something, they make out something else. Erm, that's why, erm... I do read it, like, like apparently, they celebrated, they said, they said something about them like this but actually it's like this. And it's like confusing, what do you want to believe? Do you want to believe the newspaper or do you believe the thing? 'Cause they see something in the Facebook, "oh this is in the newspaper, what is written down, is false, actually it wasn't like that, it was like this". And it's like... But I do read it, go through it, obviously go through it, pick it up now and again.

You discuss this outside of Facebook with the people you know here?

Discuss it, there's... Nothing to discuss, basically, whatever is in the newspaper, like, in my opinion... Like obviously with my mates, rarely, if it's something serious, then we do discuss it. What's it look like, what's happening, this guy was speeding erm, 100 miles an hour on the motor way, and he had an accident and passed away. This is a serious matter. And we just want to discuss, erm, make sure that anyone you see speeding, tell them, "slow down" or something. That's what it is.

[...]

You know everyone here?

I've been working here the last... I've been managing here the last seven or eight years. And yeah, it's all good, it's all family business, family wanted me to then, and... it's all good. I wouldn't work for someone else, I'd rather work for family members.

Are most of your friends also Bangladeshi?

I've got mixed friends. I've got erm, Jamaican... They're British citizens, all of them, but I got mixed friends, some of them are, erm, like, they're not Muslim, they're Christian, they're yeah, they're like yeah. I got in touch with everyone basically, because, yeah. I know a lot of people, I work here, I got, like... They come here, they talk a bit, I just get to know them. But we do, like, speak outside when I'm free, a few times, then again, I'm working all the time so, that's what it is.

How important is being Muslim to you?

Everything. Everything, yeah. Because... Everything, yeah, that's what it is. Five years ago, I wasn't following my religion. I wasn't following my religion and, I was just, erm, born in a Muslim family and I wasn't following it. I was... I was just being a youngster, whatever I want to say. And it was going round and round, my life. It wasn't going a point. I don't know, I didn't have peace in my heart or nothing. And obviously, my parents, they always used to tell, "pray", "do this" and they just... And I just realized, one day, I woke up and I just said to myself, "that's enough for me, I need to follow my religion now." And it's been five years now and I feel better than before. I do pray, fast, try to go and attend talks, read the Qur'an and I feel better than before, I could say that. There's no clubbing, there's no drinking. Yeah, it's better, it's nice. And I feel, like, before my life was going rubbish, and now I'm more actively working on my religion. It's very nice. That's why I say it's everything.

Do you connect Islam with Bangladesh?

Do I connect Islam to Bangladesh? Erm. What do you mean by connect?

When you think of Bangladesh, is there an immediate connection with Islam?

I'm not sure, I don't connect nothing to Bangladesh, like, erm, as anything about Islam, but, like, when I go to my village, obviously, I could pass the message to my family members, blessing my family members, yeah. And that's it. I don't connect nothing there but I'm not a... something I could do, have the power in my hand, I could say something in the government and it would change something, that's just not an option, I'm just a normal British citizen, living in London, visiting my parents' country, see the family, come back. But I don't connect nothing there, not really.

When you go to Bangladesh, you just visit your village in Sylhet? Or do you, like, roam around a bit?

Not really, like last time I went, I was, I went to a few like, I don't know if you know, you know them rides, you know, any idea? C'mon, you should know. You're from Germany, innit?

I'm from Belgium.

Belgium, yeah. You don't have anything like that? Where they got like rides for the kids, like tours.

Like they have here, the hop-on, hop-off?

Something like that, yeah. In Bangladesh we got that in Dhaka. I've got no family members there but I went there. No, I didn't go actually, I came from Dhaka, yeah, I went but I don't, we don't have no fam-- we've got cousins. But I don't go round much. It's like, I like more likely my village. Not like town, town's more like, what I don't like... I know you went there you said? To Sylhet? How was it, was it a little bit lively? Did you go to the village side?

The only village was Srimongol, and that's not really a village.

Srimongol is not... Erm, okay.

We went to the tea estates and visited small villages there.

Okay, cool, cool. I'm more likely to the village. We've got our family, we've got our cows there. Yeah, it's nice. The chicken, it's making that noise, early morning. And you know it's early, wake up, it's nice, yeah. I'm more likely the village than the town side, yeah.

We did go to a village but not in Sylhet, we went to the Char Lands near Bogra, the Chars of the Jamuna river.

The what? Like, I'm not even sure of... Sorry, I'm-- I don't know too many, like, sides of my country, yeah. 'Cause I don't go through there. I just know my Sylhet, and my village. That side, actually, yeah, that's it.

Do you know the history of Bangladesh?

Do I know the history, as, which history?

What do you see as the history?

I don't know, there's a history when it was one whole country, when Bangladesh became a thing, when it was Bangladesh, is it that? I do know, yeah, I know bits and bobs, when, erm, obviously there was a fight and they, erm, they, it was separated. Yeah. I know a few things, yeah, not

much. Yeah. I don't know much, but I know the history. Like a lot of people passed away, and they were coming to the village, killing everyone, and suddenly, a small, like a small group became strong and they fight it, and then they won, then they become, then they separated it. Then it was called Bangladesh, yeah. 'Cause that time, I think my Dad already, yeah, I think before the fight, my Dad already, erm, I don't know when was it, but I think before that, he came.

I don't know if you have children?

I don't have children, not yet.

If you do have them, would you also tell them about that history?

I would tell them, yeah, definite. It's good to know, it's good to know, yeah, I'll pass the message to my kids, yeah, about the history of my own country.

Would you teach them Bangla?

Yeah, yeah, definitely, Bangla is basically my first language, like, in everything. It's the first language of all I know so yeah. And that's it, yeah. Yeah.

Would you teach them as a first language?

Yeah, as a first language. My first language is Bengali, so I'd teach them that. My second language is English. But nowadays, kids are learning more English than Bengali. Like my mates' kids, they're learning more English than their own language. But that's how it is.

How do you feel about that?

It's nothing to feel... At the end of the day, that's it, kids. But, erm, it's just, erm, obvious, our, our own people, they don't know English. Not much well. If old people speak to them, they will understand less. That's what it is. But it's nothing, it's not a major something, but that's what it is, yeah.

Do you consider it important to communicate with the people back home?

I do have conversations with them, yeah, all the time, and I got plenty of family, I got my Dad's sisters there, and Dad's uncles, I know a lot... we've got a big family there. Yeah, we speak to them yeah, all the time, yeah, we speak to them, how they are, how's your life, yeah.

Are you proud of your heritage?

What do you mean?

Your Bengali heritage?

Yeah, what do you mean, like, proud, of course I'm proud. Yeah yeah. Because if I wasn't Bengali. Like, I'm practicing, I'm a Bengali Muslim, yeah. 100%. I haven't got no doubt.

Interview 9: Nazir Hossein (11)

6/11/2014

Location: Bangladeshi Chinese Restaurant, Whitechapel

Appointment through Kolsuma Begum, research participant n° 7.

You work here at Red Dragon or do you own this place?

Erm. I don't own it but yes, I work here, assistant manager.

And you were born here?

Born and raised in London, yeah.

And your parents?

Back home in Bangladesh.

Which part?

My mum and dad are both from Chittagong.

Have you ever visited the place?

First time I went was back in 2009 and then again 2010. It was my mum's first time in about 18 years, coming from Bangladesh, so it was quite emotional.

And what was your impression?

Of the country or of the family?

Both.

Country... it's... it's beautiful, but it's, you know, it's still twenty or thirty years behind to the rest of the world. But it... It was a nice feeling, seeing all my uncles and my aunts, my mum's immediate brothers and sisters, and they're all back home. So we all sat down, in the village, my granddad's village, where my mum was born and raised. It's the warm feeling of everyone was there. I mean, they're all back there now. So when Eid comes, when Ramadan comes, it's just us. So yeah, it was nice. In 2009, I went during the summer, and 2010 I went in December I think.

You're still in contact with the family members you met then?

My Mum speaks to my Nan every day. Her sisters... every day. If not, every other day. Erm. I speak to them... Due to the fact that I work twelve hours a day, I speak to them, like the last time I spoke to them was about a month ago. But at times they do, yeah, they drop me a text, saying "how's it going". So yeah.

What do you talk about when they do call?

"How's London, how's Bangladesh, how's the family?" Erm. Just average stuff. Because with the old members of the family, my aunts and uncles, it's more about, "how's your education, what am I doing?" So I'm always getting lectures about, "I should think about my future". And with my

younger cousins it would be about, "Can I send them this toy?", they want a Barcelona football T-shirt, they want this... So it's a, a mixture of things.

Do you also sometimes talk about what happens in Bangladesh?

When it comes to the situation, like, politically, I'm not really good, I know bits and bobs here and there but I'm not physically, I'm not really involved. Like a couple of years ago, there was an uprising with the government, so there was quite a few riots, a lot of people were killed, so in that aspect, everyone in my family living... wasn't directly affected but their town, the shopping centre, it was, there was a few demonstrations there, so we called to find out if they're okay. They updated me on the situation. But apart from that, it's, that's like the beginning.

That was about something that happened in the village of your family. If something was happening in Dhaka, would you hear about it too?

Erm. My mum, she always watches Bangladeshi TV channels. She watches the news. On my day off, when I spend time with her, having ginger tea or a cup of coffee, I watch it with her. I keep myself, you know, once a week, twice a month perhaps I sit down to watch the Bangladeshi news. I'm roughly up-to-date. I mean, I'm more up-to-date with what's happening back home with my family members than the actual news itself.

By yourself, you wouldn't put on those television channels?

No. I'm more for watching sports or a movie, not, not Bangladeshi channels.

Something a bit more relaxing after twelve hours of work.

Tell me about it.

Would you read newspapers, like the typical newspapers people collect here in East London?

Erm. I used to every Friday, like, after Friday prayers, outside at East London Mosque they give out free Bangladeshi newspapers. Before I used to take a few home, for my Mum. I used to read them myself. But the last time I read one, was four, five years ago.

Why is that?

I think it's just that... like the time I do want to sit down and watch it and get more information about the individual events, again from my family members or from the news. So that way, I get to, you know, it's me having a conversation with my family members and I love, they tell me a first-hand experience, whereas with the media, you know, they do exaggerate sometimes.

[...]

So, last time you went was 2010. Have you got any plans of going again in the near future?

I spoke to my Mum earlier this year. She suggested that, she wanted to, erm... Bangladesh at the moment... erm... Probably not this year, maybe, perhaps next year, we could think about it. But at the moment, we're doing a lot of work at my house so, bought new sofas, want to get the floor done, redo the whole house, there's a lot of money being spent... So, a holiday abroad, maybe next year, not this year. Erm. My Mum wanted to actually go to Saudi Arabia to, erm, do the pilgrims... the Hadj. She wants to do that first, so, maybe that and then... My Mum, she suggested that we go to Saudi for about a week and then go to Bangladesh for about two weeks and then

come back. So we're thinking about a three, four weeks' journey, to... perhaps, but next year, definitely not this year, we could look into it.

How important is being Muslim to you?

Erm, my whole... my day-to-day life is based around it, so... You know, when you wake up, till you sleep, till the last-minute prayer. Erm. I work, I try to implement things... If I knew a person was Muslim, I would greet them in that way. Erm. I've got a few non-Muslim friends who will say the same to me, just out of respect. They're not Muslim so they're not practicing but I respect they do that.

If people were to ask you, "where are you from?", what would you say?

Erm. Well, I classify myself as a British Bangladeshi so if anyone did ask me, "where are you from?" ... Well, it depends, if it was an older, say, Bangladeshi uncle for instance who came to visit... A lot of his cousins, they ask me, "where are you from?", "From London." That's where I was born and raised there. My roots are from Bangladesh, but that's where my Mum and Dad were born. So when they go on and ask, where are your parents from, then I would say, "From Bangladesh." Then, they will ask, "So, you're from Bangladesh?", I'd be, "No, I'm from London, but my parents are from back home." So I classify myself as an Asian British, yeah, basically, yeah.

Are you proud of that heritage?

Yeah, of course. Being born and raised here and having the opportunities in this country compared to, say, my family back home. When I went, first time, I saw, the moment you get out of the airport, you can see beggars there, erm... my... cousin's brothers and sisters, roughly my age if not younger, having to wake up early in the morning to go to work and then going to school, so they can pay for their own education. Whereas in this country, government pays for it. Yeah, I think the trip had an effect on me, definitely, in that sense.

Did you just stay in Chittagong or did you roam around a bit?

My aunt... no, everyone from that district, so it's, it would be within Chittagong but different sides, erm, I believe my aunt... Have you heard of, erm, Saint Martin's? Yeah, it's an island. I have an aunt living there. And then there's a place called Cox's Bazaar, I've got my uncle living there. And then the rest it's more where the villages, where my Nan grew up, they'll be based around, in the villages.

How's your Bangla? Do you speak it?

It's okay, it's okay, but if my mum speaks Bengali to me, I will reply back in English. So... it's because English is my first language. Well, time to time I do, when, like when I'm on the phone with family members back home, it'd be in Bengali. With a few of my elder cousin's brothers and sisters. 'Cause they teach English in uni... They'd speak to me in Bengali, I'd speak to them in English. So he helps me with my Bengali, I help with his English.

So, English is your first language, you weren't raised in Bengali?

My mother taught me to speak Bengali at home, but it's... When I'm speaking to my mum, it's Bengali, with my little brother it's English. I'm having to force my little brother to speak Bengali, 'cause even with Mum, he speaks English. And his Bengali isn't as good as mine or my Mum's is.

Why do you find it important to point that out to him?

It's your, you know, it's your culture, it's your heritage. You will... Okay, fair enough, you were born in London, be British, but your roots, your mother tongue, it's Bangladesh. Bengali is, you know, that's... Bangla is your language, it's your mother's tongue, so it's important that you should know it.

If you were to have children, you would teach them?

Definitely, definitely. It'd be English and... I, as a child, used to go to Arab classes as well as Bangla classes where they teach how to read, write, from a young age. It's the same for my brother as well. Mum, I think Mum strongly believes that... have our Bangla as a standard.

Do you have a lot of friends who share the same background as you?

Most of my friends are from a Bangladeshi background. I have, erm... from African-Caribbean descent, a few white... erm... it's mostly Asian, then it'd be African-Caribbean, a few Moroccan, Algerian, but mainly with Bangladeshi, Asian... Pakistani, a few. Mainly Bangladeshi.

Do you discuss politics?

Politics, erm... At times, with one of my friends, yes. He spent two years studying in Bangladesh and I'm very close with him. I used to skype him every... you know, three, four times a month. We used to call each other, he'd text me... So... At that time, we did, did discuss a few things. Lot of politics, things, what's happening with the Prime Minister, what they're doing, erm... After he came back, not so much, but times and times, but it's only within the... My Mum, she would rather speak to her brothers and sisters about this, rather than with me. On and off, really.

Does your mother find it important that you also know some things?

Erm. Yes, I think so. The fact that we're from the country, even though we're living here, but our roots are from Bangladesh, I think my mum believes it important to know what's going on, even if you haven't been to visit the family or the country, in... you know, so many years. X amount of years. She still finds it important to know what's going on.

Did she teach you the history and all that?

Erm. She's mentioned, erm, events that've happened in the past. I've, erm... At school, we've learnt more events than at home. But my mum has taught me a few. When I went back home on holiday, I went to a few monumental sets, I've been to the War Museum, I visited a few places, talked about places. I think one of them was, erm... I forgot the name, but they got a miniature version in Altab Ali Park.

The Language Movement Monument.

I think so, yeah. I mean, I went back in 2009 for about a month. I visited pretty much every place I could. And then we went the following year again. Well, the second year wasn't so much... It was more relaxin' and we went to a theme park as well. It wasn't so much, full-on, as the first one.

Because the first visit was very emotional, you said.

Eighteen years my mum didn't see her, my nan, so... And her sisters, her brothers. So it was very emotional, yes.

FIFTH WEEK

Interview 10: Focus group
with Nazmin **(12)**, Tasnim **(13)** and Naziyah **(14)**

10/11/2014

Location: Khatun family home, Angel

Appointment through Nasmin Ali, research participant n° 1.

Nasmin Ali **(1)**, her older sister Jabin (xvi), and Nazmin's two day old baby
also present

Family details: Nasmin Ali and Jabin are sisters of Naziyah, and of the husband of Nazmin **(17)**.
Nazmin and Tasnim are also sisters.

Nazmin: My belly's almost gone!

Nasmin: She was really big actually. Really big. And such a tiny baby.

Nazmin: He was two weeks early, so I thought I had another couple of... weeks.

[Baby talk]

In what language are you going to bring him up, do you think?

Nazmin: Well, he's gonna learn English, isn't he, 'cause that's what we're all speakin'. But I'm gonna try and erm, I'm making a conscious effort. But it is a conscious effort where I have to remind myself to speak to him in Bengali. At least when I'm by myself with him, because I do want him to learn Bengali. And I won't speak it the way we all speak it. Because, for most of us, it was our first language, wasn't it?

Nasmin: Yeah, it was.

Tasnim: But it's becoming harder to like--

Nazmin: -- maintain it. 'Cause even like my sister, we were both brought up in the same house, same, you know, parents, everything...

Tasnim: Yeah.

Nazmin: She speaks Bengali different to me, like, not as well as me, because she was the last one in the house, so by the time... By the time it came to her, you know, learning to speak, me and my brothers already spoke English. So we spoke English around her. So she picked up English.

Nasmin: That's true. Even in our house, we were seven. When I was growing up, I had four older than me who were already speaking English. So when she came...

Naziyah: I don't know much.

Nasmin: She... Oh my god, her Bengali is bad.

Nazmin: No but, she would just come up with some random Bengali words, like... ha ha ha.

Nasmin: Yeah, and she always uses old Bengali words.

Naziyah: That's because I work in the area with Bengalis.

You work in Whitechapel?

Naziyah: Yeah, Stepney Green. That's why.

Nasmin: She says some really old-fashioned words, like my dad, even his dad would have said. It's just strange, why would she use such strange words?

Nazmin: What was she saying the other day, *gondagul*?

Nasmin: Ha ha ha. You might know that word. It means, like, there's a problem. It's oldschool.

Nazmin: So oldschool.

Nasmin: Even our forefathers wouldn't...

[All laugh]

Tasnim: Where did you hear that?

Naziyah: I don't know... somebody just went *gondagul*. Ha ha ha.

Nazmin: Even my father, he went, "what?" I don't think that something that my dad would say.

So you think it might be better to have Bengali as [the baby's] first language?

Nazmin: I think it's inevitable that English is going to be his first language, but I would, I would like Bengali to be his first language, just because I know he's gonna learn to speak English, he lives in England, so.

Tasnim: And you know, then he can speak to his greatgrandfather.

Nazmin: Yeah, and it's like, I would, so then I would hope, it's something that I would like to equip him with, so that when he has kids, you know, his kids can carry it on. Just 'cause obviously, you know, I love my country, in the end of it, I am who I am like--

Tasnim: Well they say, kids are already smarter, kids grow up much smarter when they grow up with more languages.

Nazmin: Yeah. And also... Like a bilingual...

Nasmin: And imagine Arabic-Bengali-English... Yeah.

Nazmin: I'm also gonna try, erm, when he's a bit older, I'm also gonna teach him Mandarin or Spanish or the likes.

You speak Mandarin and Spanish?

Nazmin: No, I'm gonna get to it. I'm just trying to figure out which one is the best for him.

Tasnim: Spanish is really easy. Really basic.

I don't know about that, I studied Spanish in University...

Tasnim: Well, compared to Mandarin.

Nazmin: But the thing is, you started learning to speak Spanish when you were like an adult?

Yes, 18.

Nazmin: Whereas, with him, I want to do it from infancy, like when he's a kid, 'cause then they pick it up much sooner, so it's just something that can settle in, as his second language or third language.

Tasnim: I see him learning English, you know, forming sentences and all that, you can just... It'll be easier for him to pick up.

Nazmin: That's the idea, yeah. I just want to equip him with as much, you know, as I can. If he's got four, if he can do four languages, you know, that would be...

Nasmin: Awesome child.

Naziyah: Bengali, English...

Nazmin: But English is standard.

Nasmin: I feel bad.

Nazmin: But English, come on now, that's not, you can't help that. Arabic.

Nasmin: You can!

Nazmin: Bengali's not that hard.

Nasmin: Look at *gondagul* happened here.

[All laugh]

Naziyah: You might wanna teach him sowing.

Nasmin: That's a language to you.

Nazmin: No. He's a boy. Not gonna teach him sowing.

Naziyah: That's gender discrimination *bobby*!

Nazmin: I know, but erm, have you met his daddy [Naziyah and Nasmin's brother]? If he becomes, like, a dress maker or something...

Nasmin: I think your phone's ringing.

Tasnim: Oh.

You can raise a kid bilingual. You know, I studied language science as well and it is a good thing to raise a child bilingually, if you're persistent in who speaks Bengali, for example, and who speaks English. But only if you, like, teach the language... Like, if you switch too much, or if you do something wrong, then he becomes like half--

Nazmin: It's all about consistency.

Half-bilingual. Then he doesn't know how to express himself in any of the languages.

Nasmin: He might get a weird accent as well.

[All laugh]

Nasmin: We've got people at work who speak Spanish, who speak all this, but they've got a different language.

Naziyah: Really?

Nasmin: Yeah, I have, one of my teammates... He speaks Mandarin and everything else, but he's got sort of an accent.

Naziyah: It's like he's...

Nasmin: It's nice, yes, but you can tell it. It's like he's struggling with so many different languages that... He's an English guy but he speaks Mandarin, Spanish, he lived in China. So yeah.

Nazmin: Yeah. I guess, yeah. It's about consistency. I mean, it's all about best laid plans. I've got so many plans for him. But who knows.

Nasmin: He might just say, I want to be an artist!

Nasmin: My brother's already--

Naziyah: Or a make-up artist.

You'd like that, wouldn't you?

[All laugh]

Nasmin: My brother's already campaigning for his football career.

Which team should he support?

All: Arsenal.

Nazmin: Obviously he's supporting Arsenal.

You know my pregnant friend [my flatmate Aisha], her husband [my flatmate Mahmud] supports Arsenal, but you know Shohef [my other flatmate, Nasmin's colleague], he's a big Chelsea fan.

Nasmin: Oh yeah!

And they're already fighting right now. He's already saying he's going to get a Chelsea shirt for the baby.

Nazmin: If my little brother gets in there, like, before anyone else gets in there...

Tasnim: He's not--

Nazmin: Yeah, he's not much of a football fan. He just pretends to be when the world cup comes on and stuff.

Tasnim: But he loves other sports, which is weird.

Nazmin: That's what he's like. I'm--

Nasmin: What's this black stuff on [the baby's] lips? They're all chapped.

[More baby talk]

[To Nasmin about the baby] His dad's also Bengali?

Nazmin: Yeah.

Nasmin: Her husband's my little brother. So it's me, him, and then her [Naziyah]. Yeah.

Nazmin: Yeah, you're number five, isn't it?

Nasmin: Yeah. She's like the...

Naziyah: Number seven.

Nasmin: There's seven of us.

Jabin [just entered]: Do you need me to get something?

Nasmin: Yeah, go ahead.

What was her name?

Nasmin: Jabin. She's my... That's her son, the boy that you saw.

Nazmin: You know, sometimes, your family is like... You know those sketch shows, where there's a tiny car and when you open the door, there's like ten, twelve people coming out of it, and you're like, "how many guys fit in that car?" There's so many of you guys!

[All laugh]

Nasmin: There's so many of us. The other day at work, we had an away day, and they had to, we had to give them an interesting fact, and I thought, I'm going to tell everyone I have seven brothers and sisters, 'cause everyone's always "oh my god", so I told them, and no one knew. They thought I was an only child, so I was like, do I really give off that vibe?

Nazmin: That "I can't share"-vibe.

[All laugh]

Nasmin: Ooooh! But I'm always like, maybe because I don't talk about them that much, 'cause I'm hardly here, I'm only here now, then I told them and they were so fascinated – unreal. They were like, "what does the older one do?" When I told them I have nephews, twenty... twenty two, they were even more shocked. Ha ha ha.

Nazmin: That is pretty shocking.

Tasnim: That age gap is really hard to explain to people.

Nasmin: They just can't come around how, how my mum has seven kids. Because, each family is like one or two.

[To Nazmin] Do you also feel like seven kids?

Naziyah: She'll be... She'll have a football team!

Nazmin: The thing is, like, I do remember thinking when I was younger, like, oh I don't mind having a massive family. If I could afford it, I would have like five kids. Even with you guys, I think it's really great, how many of you guys there are and, I like it, I like the variation and stuff. Yeah. Like, it must be nice for you, because you have, like, your oldest sister, it's nice to get her viewpoint sometimes. It's nice to have.

Nasmin: But she's very traditional.

Nazmin: Yeah.

Nasmin: Well, I wouldn't say *gondagul* traditional, but she does have her values.

Nazmin: But she's like in the middle, whereas our mums would be completely, like, back in the days. But with the older sister, there's more like a sort of modern twist on it so it's quite nice to have her opinion sometimes.

[More baby talk, Nazmin's mother-in-law enters, she starts speaking in Bengali, daughters and daughter-in-law answer in English]

Nasmin: It's funny, my mum just came in and Tasnim said, "you're overaged".

Tasnim: I did not!

Nasmin: But my mum's English is so funny, you should share your hospital story.

Nazmin: Yeah, like, where did that English come from?

Nasmin: But my dad, he has almost like a sort of an accent.

Nazmin: My dad, he... Someone came to the door one day, and he opened and said, [very British] "Hello mate, you alright?"

Nasmin: And then they go like "alright, darling", and I'm like, "no"... It's just so weird.

Naziyah: His English is really good.

Nasnim: Yeah, it is. I just wish, like, dad, erm, use that, and...

Nazmin: It's just, our parents, like my mum, she speaks English as well, like she understands everything I'm saying right now and she can respond but she wouldn't. Because she's... shy.

Tasnim: Yeah, like when I speak to her--

Nazmin: Like she'll do it in a situation where she needs to, but she finds it very embarrassing, she thinks, when people start looking and laughing. But I guess so... We do laugh a lot. Look at us, laughing right now.

[More baby talk]

Nasmin: So we went to this friend's house yesterday, and her mum speaks fluent English.

Naziyah: Like us.

Nasmin: Yeah, she hasn't got an accent. So we came into the living room and she asks, "what drink would you like?" and erm, she was like, "we have *horange* juice", and we just start laughing, and she asks her, "mum, why do you say *horange*?"

Naziyah: Why did she say "*horange* juice"?

Nasmin: 'Cause she was speaking Bengali! See, that's the thing.

Naznim: I think that's what it is, because we do correct them a lot.

[...]

Naznim: My elder brother, he went to the Philippines, and when they ask my mother, she goes like, "*Philipaines*".

Nasmin: Ha ha ha.

Nazmin: And then people keep laughing at her. But see, it's because of reasons like that, that she wouldn't actively go out and say...

Tasnim: But then there's occasions where we'll speak English, and my mum will have a go, "Why do you speak English? Please. You're brought up in a Bengali household."

So your parents talk to you in Bengali and you would respond in English?

Tasnim: Yeah, sometimes. Or we would just talk English amongst each other. And she would... She wouldn't know what to respond in English, so she'd be like, "Can't we just have a conversation in Bengali?"

Naziyah: But you know what, in Stepney [Green], people my mum and dad's age, they wouldn't speak Bengali, they'd speak English, and I'm like, "I'm trying to help you but I can't understand you." But they'll go on. Some people are different.

Nasmin: But I wish-- sorry I interrupted you.

Naziyah: That's alright.

Nasmin: But I wish my mum would actually work and then really experience what life is like.

Naziyah: Yeah. 'Cause sometimes I feel like... What they do...

Nasmin: Just being at home, housewives. They should have more ambitions.

Nazmin: But you see, it's one of those things were, they're content, because they never wanted more, they never expected more or never wanted more. So... I don't think they're unhappy like that. I don't think your mum's unhappy, is it?

Nasmin: I wish she...

Nazmin: The thing is, from a young age, we always knew what we are capable of. We had the potential to do, you know, x, y, z, or we see other people do so many different things, but, for them... with them, I think, that's all they've ever seen. Like with their mums...

Nasmin: Can you imagine mum working in a bank? Ha ha. 'Cause I have a colleague, all about fifty, and they're all working. They work outdoors.

Nazmin: Yeah, that's true. Even at work, my workplace, we had a fortyfour year old woman.

Nasmin: Yeah yeah yeah. Our manager's... is like fifty, and he's got a daughter, and he's like, "I've got a daughter your age and I'm managing". [To Jabin] Do you want to come? You know Sarah went to Bangladesh?

Jabin: Yeah, you were telling me.

I went in April. It was just after the elections in Bangladesh.

Jabin: Oh alright.

I don't know if you've heard about that?

Tasnim: I know, it was crazy. It's always is. It's ridiculous.

Nazmin's husband: Is there a charger in your room?

[...]

Do you guys also want kids?

Tasnim: Sorry?

Nazmin: Do you want kids?

Tasnim: No.

Naziyah: No.

Tasnim: No...

Naziyah: No, you do! I just don't want to go for the pain.

Tasnim: I... I'd love to adopt... one from Bangladesh, who could be...

Naziyah: I just think that, when I have kids, it's gonna be much more difficult for mum and dad, because if we get married, they're gonna talk like us, speak like us, they'd be thinking, "oh the Bengali culture just keeps decreasing" ...

Nazmin: That's what I don't want. Like, we don't want our kids to...

Tasnim: 'Cause I know loads of black kids, not like, they...

Naznim: They can't speak.

Tasnim: Like broken...

Nazmin: And we would laugh at them and that's why I'm, at least when I'm by myself with him, at least I want to try and speak Bengali, because that's the last thing I want. I don't want... I don't want it to die out, for a start, and secondly, like, when my gran speaks to him for example, like, he's lucky enough to have his great-grandparents around, and when he speaks to them, I want them to hold a conversation with him. For them not to get frustrated because he's not able to communicate with them. Or his grandmothers, you know. Erm. And also, I want... [To the baby] Oh, hello.

Naziyah: 'Cause when I get to work, I get laughed at, because of my Bengali.

Nasmin: Bengali!

Tasnim: I always say...

Naziyah: They say I'm so bad, and then they fixed me.

Nazmin: They fixed you?

Naziyah: Even then, I didn't know what the problem was, till I realized, well...

Nasmin: I think it's your accent as well, she doesn't really have the right accent. But I think, I struggled for a long time with my in-laws.

Naziyah: Yeah, you get laughed at. Especially if we get married, our in-laws, they would laugh at us.

Nasmin: Yeah, they will laugh.

Naziyah: And they'd say, "Didn't your mum and dad teach anything?" and all that stuff.

Nazmin: What you need to do, what you need to do is get a job in East London.

Naziyah: Yeah, like me and her. Trust me, I learned the hard way, *gondagul*.

Tasnim: That's why I want to go to Bangladesh, 'cause then, that way you're forced to just speak Bengali.

What is the last time you went?

Tasnim: Seven, eight years ago. I don't know, a fairly long time ago, I was like twelve, thirteen. Maybe, yeah.

And you haven't gone that much, either?

Naziyah: Last time I went was 1998.

Tasnim: Oh gosh.

Naziyah: I don't think I could cope if I go back there.

Tasnim: It's really, it's developed a lot now. It's much more...

Naziyah: The village was the most fun part.

Nazmin: I'm an acquired taste person.

Nasmin: Really?

Nazmin: No, like, I can take it for a certain amount—I, I've, I went last year, isn't it?

Tasnim: Yeah.

Nazmin: So I went last year in May, and then I went the year before as well. And I did love it, but... I only went for two weeks...

Tasnim: But it's the circumstances in which you went.

Nasmin: Plus you were quite older then.

Nazmin: Yeah. I only went for two weeks, but any more than that...

Nasmin: Whereas... If you're like under the age of twelve, no one's really like going to try and kidnap you and get married to you. So when you're that age...

But you're already married.

Nasmin: Yeah.

Tasnim: Yeah, that's the big problem, when you go. It's just like a passport, a free passport.

[More baby talk]

Nasmin [about Jabin]: She's a frequent flyer to Bangladesh. She loves it. She's planning her next holiday.

Naziyah: She has Bangladesh in her house. Ha ha ha.

Nasmin: She's married to a Bangladeshi.

Naziyah: Which is the equivalent of Bangladesh, being married to Bangladesh.

Nazmin: They're patriotic.

He's not from here, he's from--

Jabin: He's from Bangladesh, yeah.

Naziyah: He's fresh...

Nasmin: No he's not, he got legalized!

[All laugh]

Nasmin: No, he's got his British passport!

Jabin: So what are you doing, are you just interviewing? What are you doing like?

Naziyah: It's like an informal conversation.

Tasnim: Informal conversation.

Yes, that's what I'm doing.

Jabin: Aaah.

Naziyah: It's like a focus group.

Jabin: Yeah.

Naziyah: These aren't that worse.

Nasmin: Nazi's being interviewing [Sarah].

[All laugh]

Naziyah: Well, of course.

Jabin: Alright, can I hold my nephew? 'Cause you had him all day.

Nasmin: He's been boring. Lazy baby.

[More baby talk]

Do you have a lot of friends who also have babies?

Nazmin: No, I'm one of the firsts actually.

Naziyah: Even in your family.

How long are you home for? A couple of months or...?

Nazmin: Home for?

Actually, I don't know, do you work?

Nazmin: Oh, no, yeah, I work. I went on maternity literally last Friday. I had just one week at home.

[More baby talk]

You want a lazy Bangladeshi baby? 'Cause it's interesting, you saying you want to adopt a baby from Bangladesh.

Tasnim: Yeah... Just... It would be easier to get someone to...

Nazmin: It would be easier to get mum to accept it.

Tasnim: Yeah. I wouldn't mind actually, anywhere, I've always said I kind of wanted to adopt. It's just so difficult to bring, you know, I say it, but, in reality, that's another thing, trying to actually get one.

[The story of how Nazmin went into labour and the in-laws' reaction]

Nazmin: You're recording? This is not all going into your study?

All of it.

Naziyah: OK, let's get down to business.

Nasmin: Yeah, you probably don't get much out of us.

Naziyah: Ask the next question.

Jabin: Oh shit, it's been recording? Can we have a copy of this?

Nazmin: Yeah, I think you need to direct it from here.

Jabin: 'Cause we can go on forever.

I've noticed that. OK, a question. Like, for example, if someone in Bangladesh, had a baby, do you immediately hear from that part of the family?

Jabin: Yeah. The technology's so advanced now. They'd ring you within the minute.

Within the minute?

Nasmin: They might-- while you're getting stitched up.

Jabin: Because it's so advanced nowadays.

Nazmin: But that's nowadays, isn't it?

Jabin: I guess it's--

Nazmin: That's for the... I'd like to say rich people, but I don't think it's rich, it's more like the people who have people here.

Nasmin: In the past, we'd have to go all the way to town.

Nazmin: Yeah, yeah. In the past, I reckon--

Jabin: Yeah, my husband didn't know my son was born until the following day. Back then, there was no mobiles and things.

Nazmin: And that's only fourteen years ago.

Jabin: Fourteen years ago. He found out next day, erm, they called, and then they send someone by car and he found out.

Nazmin: Oh, so he had the news delivered to him by a person? An actual messenger! Some news.

Jabin: Because back then, just when all of the others got born, so it was nothing big. A week before, that one got born.

Naziyah: Oh yeah, they were born, they were all born.

Nazmin: Yeah, but, but mine, you know, the London child--

Jabin: But then it's true, if you don't see someone, you don't love them.

Tasnim: Yeah.

Jabin: Then they were like, [monotone voice] oh OK, she had a son.

Tasnim: 'Cause they just pop 'em out there, looks like.

Nazmin: When I was in Bangladesh...

Jabin: It's all c-section though, at home. Yeah! Because the hospitals make money.

Nazmin: But it depends on like how rich you are.

Jabin: No, but if you can afford to go to a hospital, they know you've got 40.000 Taka.

Nasmin: How much is that in London? 400 pounds?

Naziyah: To do a c-section? I'm flying out there.

Jabin: It's not safe.

Nazmin: Good luck with that.

[More baby talk and a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of a c-section as well as some basic biology]

Naziyah: Can't we do the next question? Next question!

Nazmin: But when you have your baby, you're going to know what's happening, you're going to be so prepared.

Jabin: You know what it is, when you have had a baby, you kinda like shocking people who don't have a baby.

Tasnim: You guys didn't even know.

Naziyah: Now the image is stuck in my head.

Nazmin: I didn't scream that much, did I? There was a lady next door, and she said she was dying, so when I went to scream, she went to scream louder. Even the midwife was going, "I'm so sorry about this, I've never even heard anything like this, it's never usually is like this".

Nasmin: Oh is it?

Nazmin: And I was thinking, "This is coming, this is what's going to happen to me... What's going to happen?" And I was like. And I was like.

Nasmin: Alright, let's move on. You're scaring me now. Next question, you're scaring me.

You said to me, when I first interviewed you [Nasmin], you said you did not have that many relatives back in Bangladesh.

Nasmin: We don't have many cousins, so... All of my mum's family, they're in the States. But everyday, we talk to my gran and my mum's sister and brother. So we always... I even went to visit them. So we really try. My dad only has a brother now. He's very ill and his sister passed away, last, this year. So he only has one brother left and that's him. No parents. And he's got like nephews. But yeah, we don't have much family, like, aunties and uncles, do we? We only have each other and our extended families now. Like my in-laws. My little brother's in-laws [meaning Nazmin and Tasnim]. That's our family now.

Do you [Nazmin and Tasnim] still have family in Bangladesh?

Nazmin: Yeah, we got quite a lot of family in Bangladesh, but we also have quite a good amount of family here as well. My dad's siblings, his two brothers are here, and then obviously my cousins from them. And then, he still got two sisters back home, and they have kids back home, so... On my dad's side, it's quite evened out. On my mum's side, all her siblings are here.

Jabin: Mum, make me a cuppa?

Nazmin: So we have, we have like, yeah, so I'd say, yeah--

Tasnim: Yeah, my mum's got like eleven or ten...

Nazmin: No, she's got ten other siblings from her dad's second marriage.

Tasnim: But my gran, she had like nine...

Nazmin: She had nine kids. So my grandmother, my mum's mum had nine kids. But, unfortunately, only my mum survived infancy and the rest of them had like, couple of them still births, caught death, you know, all sorts... But then my granddad's second wife, she had ten kids. No, she had eleven. One passed away. And then she still got ten. By that point, they were probably just dropping out.

Tasnim: Very big family, yeah.

And do you hear from them?

Tasnim: Yeah. They've got like a... an eight bedroom house, like.

Nazmin: Yeah, so, yeah, so we're close with our aunts.

Because of the technology, what you said earlier, it must be much easier?

Nazmin: No, they're all here! They're all here. Yeah yeah. The second, erm, wife--

Tasnim: From mum's side--

Nazmin: --from my mum's side, she's here, she... All her kids are here.

But you still have some family in Bangladesh?

Nazmin: Oh yeah, we got loads of family in Bangladesh.

And do you hear from them equally?

Nazmin: Yeah. I Whatsapp one of my cousins in Bangladesh now, so you know, 'cause...

Tasnim: But it's obviously hard to be connected to them, because they're in another country, we haven't really met them... You might maybe speak to them, when mum speaks to them, she says "Speak to your cousin," and you say, OK, "Hi cousin".

And what do you talk about then?

Tasnim: Oh really, just like pleasantries, really. We're not in their life.

Nazmin: If you can, you kind of avoid talking to them. It's, you know, it's people you don't know. Because I went last year and I went quite recently and I met a couple of them, and I was able to kind of bond with them, there's a couple that I might... Even then, you wouldn't go out of your way, but Whatsapp's convenient, so I will message them and stuff. But you don't really have a connection, do you? And there's not really anything in common that you can speak with them about, so...

Tasnim: Maybe religion...

Nasmin: My brother has a lot of common friends.

Nazmin: He has really good friends that have come here.

Nasmin: Several.

Naziyah: He's got a really good niece that lives not too far from us, she loves Bangladesh, and she got married.

Jabin: Why are you guys saying stuff? It's recording, it's not the truth.

Naziyah: But they are close because they tells about Bangladesh and stuff.

Tasnim: Maybe about religion and stuff.

Nasmin: She likes... I don't know. She doesn't even like Bangladeshi even if she got married to one.

[All laugh]

Naziyah: I don't even know what Bangladeshi is.

Jabin: I don't know, I just don't like--

Tasnim: Haven't you ever been?

Naziyah: Yeah, but years back, I can't remember.

Jabin: Yeah, we are British.

Nasmin: We are British--

Naziyah: [in a very posh accent] We are British.

Tasnim: I think we are more Muslim than Bangladeshi.

Do you feel the same way about Islam being your identity?

Nasmin: Yeah. I wouldn't say I'm an islamist but I'd say...

Nazmin: Yeah. As in... That, that, if I was gonna round it up, that's what it would be.

Naziyah: Because in our culture, we follow that. Because I look like a Muslim, I don't look like a Bengali, with my hijab.

Tasnim: Yeah, that's true, the identity...

Naziyah: It's my identity...

Nasmin: We follow the traditions...

Naziyah: My identity, my dress code, manners...

Jabin: Yeah, if someone would ask me, who are you, I'd say "I'm a Muslim". I wouldn't say I'm Bengali, I wouldn't say I'm British.

Nasmin: I'd actually say--

Jabin: First thing I'd say I'm a Muslim.

Nasmin: Yeah, and then they'd say, "Where are your parents from?"

Naziyah: Yeah, I agree.

Tasnim: 'Cause that's where your belief stems from. You really can learn a lot about a person from their beliefs.

Jabin: It's quite interesting though, 'cause you wouldn't see an English person say "I'm a Christian", they would just say "I'm white", or "I'm..."

Nasmin: Yeah yeah. But if we wouldn't have our religion, would you say you're Bengali?

Naziyah: No. I'd say I'm British.

Nasmin: I'd say I was British.

Tasnim: I agree.

Jabin: I wouldn't say I was British. I'd say I was born in England.

Nazmin: Yeah, I would...

Naziyah: You wasn't born in England, though.

Jabin: No, but that wouldn't mean I'd say I was British.

Nasmin: Oh yes, she isn't born in Britain!

Nazmin: Oh, it's not good for the thing. You're not allowed in the thing.

Jabin: Am I excluded from the survey?

Nasmin: Yeah.

Jabin: Oh shit.

Naziyah: But clearly, she don't mind.

Nasmin: She is a British Bangladeshi, tough.

Naziyah: You sure?

Nasmin: Check her passport! Check her birth certificate!

Yeah, I'll need copies of that, for my research.

Nazmin: Oh do you really?

No, I don't. I'm just kidding. Imagine that.

Nazmin: Yeah, imagine. 'Cause we don't know where our passports are.

Nasmin: No, imagine if you were back home and your cousins be here and actually...

Naziyah: I'd be depressed.

Nasmin: We'd be living in poverty.

Nazmin: Especially 'cause, when I go home, and I see my immediate cousins, like my dad's sisters' kids, the difference between them and...

Nasmin: Just their health, their outlook, their education...

Nazmin: Their outlook, yeah. I feel, what depresses me the most, is not... OK, the health and all that, that's sad, you know, the money, all of that, that's really sad. But it's the outlook that they have...

Jabin: There is no outlook.

Nazmin: That's--

Tasnim: Yeah.

Nasmin: There isn't. All there is, is marriage. They have to get to London, somehow.

Naziyah: Yeah, no matter what.

Nazmin: Yeah. If they're a guy, then yeah, that's their thing. And you get two kinds of girls, you get the kind of girl, that kind of, like, the wanna be, I guess the most ambitious girls there are the ones that wanna get married--

Jabin: London.

Nazmin: To a London guy, and come here.

That's their ambition?

Jabin: That's the ambition.

Nasmin: They can then support their families with money from here. That is their mentality.

Jabin: In Bangladesh, you'll never meet a girl that would say, I want to be a doctor. Or a pharmacist. They would say, I want to do a degree, but they would never say, I want to be a career woman. Or a wanna get a job there.

Tasnim: We've got a cousin that now can be a teacher, but she doesn't get much...

Jabin: There's no ambition.

Nasmin: Their ambition is, their goal in life is going to London, where, they think, money is so big, and like, they'd be happier here. But I don't think that's true.

You think you'd be equally happy (or more happy) in Bangladesh?

Jabin: I don't think I'd be happy in Bangladesh.

Nazmin: No.

Nasmin: I wouldn't be happy.

Nazmin: No but I think, it's one of those things, if you picked me up now and dragged me to Bangladesh, I wouldn't be happy. But--

Nasmin: But if that was your life...

Nazmin: But if that was my life, if I was born there, I don't think I'd know any better.

Nasmin: And all you'd hope for, is to come here, and get married off to--

Nazmin: Yeah, well, that's, like I said, you get the two types of girls--

Tasnim: But that's what you're told, they tell you that.

Nazmin: --you get the one, the ones that want to get married to a guy from here and come here, or the ones that just wanna get married. And have like seven kids.

[Nazmin's husband enters to ask if anyone would like some tea]

Nasmin: I'd have a cup. Do you want a cuppa tea, Sarah?

No, I'm fine, thanks.

Nazmin: And where's the baby? Is the heat on in my room?

Jabin: Back home, if you're educating your children, you educate them for them, for the, for the purpose of having a good husband or wife, who lives abroad. Not, like, like even with my, like, extended family, like my niece who came here, even though she's quite educated, they never thought, "Let's get her married to a bank manager or a guy that's got a job in Bangladesh". Their ambition was to educate her to a quite higher level but it was to get her ...

Married here.

Tasnim: To get a better marriage proposal.

Jabin: She's not doing too bad.

Nasmin: She's still working but she'd never want it to be a...

Nazmin: But she's one of the--

Jabin: I think she's one of the lucky ones.

Nazmin: --one of the rare cases where, yeah, lucky ones actually, she's one of those rare kind of cases.

Jabin: She's quite... letting the man do all the work.

Tasnim: It's really strange, because, one of my Arab friends, erm, she wants to get a degree and stuff, but only that she can get married and be of equal status of her husband. And then settle down and not work. Like I said, just to be... equalling the playing field, sort of, almost. I just mean, it's a strange mentality to have.

Jabin: Actually, I would, I would do that to my daughter.

Nazmin: I would want--

Jabin: I would do that.

Nazmin: Can you explain?

Jabin: Just like... Like Tam was saying, I would want that for my daughter, I wouldn't want her to, erm... be...

Nasmin: Not having a degree and stuff.

Jabin: I want her to have a degree just so she can have a status. But I wouldn't want...

Tasnim: But I, I don't think it makes anyone any less...

Nasmin: Any less acceptable.

Tasnim: Yeah.

Jabin: I wouldn't want her to go to her husband's house and be like... I would hate that. Education makes you a bit higher--

Nasmin: I think, in this room, these two, they didn't go to Uni.

Jabin: No, if your husband, if you go to a family... Like my husband's like really... But look at it, imagine if he was like really educated, wouldn't that bring you down?

Tasnim: That's the issue, where I don't think you should be discriminated by... a piece of paper that tells you that you're of this academic background... Yeah.

Nasmin: My in-laws didn't care--

Nazmin: But I think that changes a person.

Jabin: Yeah, they did, that was a big thing, Nasmin, when you got married, the fact that you had your law degree. That made you way ahead.

Nasmin: I don't... I just... They didn't... care what that was. They were more concerned with me working in a bank and stuff. That, for them, was so amazing, that I'm work as a bank manager. That's their thing. They used to tell people, "Yeah, my daughter-in-law is a bank manager." And I was like, "I have a law degree and you don't bring that up?" and stuff.

Jabin: Hmm... I would want my daughter... I would want my daughter to be fairly educated but be a housewife.

Nazmin: Yeah.

Jabin: But be a housewife. Yeah. I don't think she should be the...

Naziyah: I want to be a housewife.

Nazmin: But would it make a difference to you who she marries?

Jabin: Yeah, I would.

Nazmin: In the sense, would he need to have a degree?

Jabin: No, I don't think I'd care if he'd have a degree. But I want him to be able to look after her.

Naziyah: Be successful.

Jabin: Like, being able to financially... look after her. I don't want her to have to go to work.

Nazmin: But is there a degree of looking after that you'd expect?

Jabin: Yeah. 'Cause my daughter would be...

Nazmin: Because she has a degree, like that's what I'm saying, because she has a degree, so you'd expect him to... be able to support.

Jabin: No, I'd just want her to have a degree, because, let's say, she does get divorced or anything like that, she got something to fall back on, that's the only reason; for her own security. But not... I don't think it's a status thing, it's just... I think I don't want them to lead the life I had, I want them to be looked after. I don't want her to do the looking after, I don't think that's fair. I think that's not what w-- I know we're in this modern age, but I think everyone wants to have their babies and just chill.

Nazmin: Yeah, look after them. They [their mums] did that life.

Tasnim: Sorry, I, I, you can't... you can't--

Jabin: I think we should have the right to be able to chill with our babies, and not worry about financial strains.

Nazmin: Yeah, but you kind of have to...

Jabin: But if I want to, I don't mind going out one day to work.

Nasmin: The thing is, I would never--

Jabin: You want that option. That's what I'm saying. I'm not saying I want to sit at home. I just want that option, that's all I'm saying.

To be able to choose between...

Jabin: Yeah. When you're younger, like these guys [Tasnim and Naziyah], when you're younger, I was probably like them, all about career.

Naziyah: Yeah, I think about my "career".

Your career as a housewife!

[All laugh]

Jabin: But when you're... when you get to...

Nasmin: About how she's gonna be dressed up in the right outfit!

[All laugh]

Naziyah: Yeah, I do want to be a housewife. 'Cause I want to have my babies and be able to go out with my husband's credit card and not worry. 'Cause I want to buy my baby whatever I want. But I know that if I stop working and have a baby, I don't want to...

Tasnim: I think reality is not... That's just stressful.

Nasmin: Stressful. Like our older sister's husband was doing really well, she was a housewife, but she didn't like to be a housewife, she hated it.

Naziyah: She hated it, "boring". But I would not be bored, I would like it.

Jabin: But she had other issues. It wasn't... I'm talking about the financial side of stuff. That was emotional stuff.

Nazmin: Yeah, she never had issues because she...

Jabin: She probably never had money problems in her entire life. She got married at sixteen and then she went into a rich family. I don't she worried about a pound in her life. Now she worries about pounds and stuff.

Naziyah: But why?

Nazmin: That's her choice.

Jabin: Because she's trying to, you know, I don't know why, she wants to...

Tasnim: She's got three kids now, she wants them to have...

Naziyah: But she doesn't have to, that's the thing, she never has to worry about money.

Jabin: The thing is you get all your priorities changed.

Nasmin: Yeah.

Jabin: I think it's not just Bengali or British, I think that's for all women, I think. Nothing to do with our cultures, I think.

Tasnim: Yeah.

Nazmin: It's true. I remember, when I was younger, fighting, arguing with my parents, my mum or whatever. [...] I remember arguing with them because I didn't want to get married back home. Well I think they... My mum, she wanted me to get married back home. And I remember, me like, thinking, that's like... you know, a death sentence. I remember thinking that because...

Tasnim: You're telling horror stories.

Nazmin: Yeah. You just wanted to be... I was thinking like, "No", I wanted to be...

Naziyah: Be normal.

Nazmin: Yeah, I wanted to be normal. Not to be married to a guy back home, and have to, you know, not be able to work and do what he says and... So on, so on... You know. Having to stay at home. I want to be able to go out, do my th-- You know, work and go to university and stuff. You know, to the point where... I wouldn't... It wasn't like I messed up the real, the theories of why... but one of the reasons why I didn't go to Uni was because I thought I was getting married back home, so what's the point? Why am I--

Tasnim: It lowers your ambition.

Nazmin: Yeah, it lowered my ambition, exactly.

Nasmin: Your mum wanted you to get married quite young, like my dad. Because she got married at, what was it?

Jabin: But your mum has got quite, I would say, an open mind.

Nazmin: That's now, that's now.

Tasnim: Mum's changed over time.

Nazmin: My mum has... has... like, is like the definition of evolution.

Nasmin: I was so shocked by it.

Nazmin: When she got married, she was really old. Not traditional.

Naziyah: But she does remind me of our family, she does have her traditional values.

Nazmin: Yeah, she got her set of values, very proper. She's very, very--

Tasnim: --proper.

[...]

Nazmin: So, to the point, where it did lowered my ambition. What's the point? If I am getting married back home, there's no point of me going, spending three four years, getting a degree, and not being able to use it. And erm. So I might as well work and kind of blow my money, I blew my money or go out, kind of, while I got the chance.

Tasnim: But like, my friend feels like that now as well, like she's really talented and she was good at literature and she's doing well in Uni. But all her mum can see is, go get your degree so I can get you married off. And it's really discouraging for what she's trying to achieve and sometimes, almost puts you off wanting to do it. But she still, you know, persists, because she enjoys it, but it's just, on the flip side of it, she's got someone telling her, "Just do it, so you can get married". And, it's just like, "Is that the end goal for me, doing this?"

You all associate Bangladesh with like getting married there?

Jabin: Yeah. It's very negative. It's a negative.

Naziyah: It feels like... prison. Or--

Nasmin: It's what's coming for you, you have to give them something back. If I wasn't married, I wouldn't even go.

Nazmin: [To Nasmin] Now that you're married, do you feel--

Nasmin: I have no attachment.

Jabin: Liberated, yeah.

Nazmin: Now that I'm married, I don't feel that bad about-- Yeah, I feel liberated, when it comes to Bangladesh, because I'm not that... I'm not worried.

Nasmin: I feel no attachment.

Naziyah: Let me tell you, I wouldn't go. Tasnim wouldn't go.

Nasmin: All I have now, we only have one uncle back home, that's all. [...] Our parents want to retire back home, so they build this really big house, and they always wanted for us to go and live there, but we always say, we live in this country now; everyone's moved out, in their small flats. They feel content, they just want to retire, but I have no attachment.

Do you [Nazmin] have some kind of positive imagery of Bangladesh?

Nazmin: Yeah. Now I do, like I said, now that I'm married, and I don't have any... when I'm going home now--

Jabin: Your mum's back.

Nazmin: I feel like I need to move out. [...] You know what she said to me yesterday? "I'm not trying to take over, I just want him to be alive long enough".

Nasmin: She's very dramatic.

Nazmin: "It's only the first three months, and afterwards, I'll leave you to it, yeah? But at least let him survive for three months."

Jabin: It's 'cause of the history and stuff.

Nazmin: I'm like, I'm sorry, her brothers and sisters were born in a mudhut back home. My son wasn't born in a mudhut.

Nasmin: Tasnim, bring the baby! He's thirsty!

[More baby talk]

What about you, Naziyah, do you have any positive imagery of Bangladesh? Because it's been a long time since you've been there, hasn't it?

Nasmin: She's only been once.

Naziyah: I would like to go, but I would never go now, because I'd know that someone would do something.

You don't see it as a holiday?

Naziyah: No. You [Nasmin] wouldn't let me go. I'd just get kidnapped. Or harassed.

Nasmin: Or harassed, yeah. When she goes back...

Naziyah: If I go there, I need to get married.

Nasmin: They're so frightened that she needs to go anyway, you have so much money and like.

Do you still follow something about the country, for example, the news and stuff?

Jabin: My husband does. Boring. All of that politics rubbish.

Naziyah: Yeah, I do. But it's all corrupt, I hate it. It's bad.

Nazmin: Why do you?

Naziyah: Because those women with their big...

Nazmin: No no, as in, why do you follow it?

Naziyah: Erm, 'cause mum and dad watch it.

Jabin: Yeah, when you hear about it, when they talk about it. I like, I do like some of the interesting stuffs, like, when my husband translates whatever happens, it's quite interesting. But it's all about politics, I find it's so boring. Like, in BBC, you watch other stuff, but Bangladesh is just politics.

Nazmin: And it's all just, there's one woman leading the country, and there's fifty men around her.

Nasmin: There's always so much violence.

Nazmin: And they don't even know what they're talking about. And then, they just...

Jabin: But a lot of it has to do with our language, because we don't speak the same Bengali.

[All]: We can't understand it.

Nazmin: You know what, tomorrow, I'm going to tell mum to stay at home, because I can't deal with this anymore. She says stuff that really offends me, but I bite my tongue. "If I left you, you would drop the baby and then social services would get involved." How could she say that? How could she think I would drop my son?

[More baby talk, discussion on whether or not to feed him now]

Tasnim, while you were gone, we just had a little discussion, on whether or not they follow the news in Bangladesh. Do you do that?

Tasnim: Not really. I mean, I know the main two political parties, but it doesn't really interest me. It's the interest of my parents.

They watch Bengali news channels?

Tasnim: Yeah, yeah. They'll follow it, and then I'm here.

You'd never watch it by yourself?

Tasnim: No, it's just... not.

Or on facebook?

Tasnim: No. That is why I wouldn't call the culture really something that defines me, because it's not... It's not something I follow, really. But I'd say, the main things...

She was just saying, she doesn't follow it and that makes her feel like she's not connected. Is that right? Or could you rephrase that?

Tasnim: I was just saying that I don't follow any politics up here, any culture... I mean, really, what traditions do we really follow, other than speaking the language? Maybe some, like, foods...

Nasmin: You don't even, you know that monument, like where the people died in Bangladesh, they don't understand what that is.

Tasnim: Oh yeah, I've been there. Yeah.

Nasmin: I've seen the memorials but I don't know what they stand for, that's really bad.

You know some of the history and stuff?

Jabin: Well, I know, my parents are quite racist, so we keep the Pakistanis away.

Tasnim: I know the history because of something I had to do for school, like a school project on ethnicity and background. Even like my grandmother, she tells me stories about people who came living to the village.

Naziyah: They told us about people in the village, how they all got locked up in one room.

Does that have an impact on how you see Bangladesh, hearing those stories?

Naziyah: Yeah.

Nasmin: Even then, we look at Bangladesh as really bad, a low way, we expect that. And the stories, on like their place in society...

Tasnim: I feel that here.

Here?

Tasnim: Yeah, I don't know where I'm getting it from. It's the old people's mentality.

Do you want to marry a Bangladeshi?

Naziyah: I have to.

Tasnim: Yeah.

Naziyah: No, I want to. For my kid. I wouldn't want my son not to know...

Nasmin: It's strange, we're saying how we don't feel the attachment, then why do we care if we marry a Bangladeshi or not?

Naziyah: Because of their upbringing! It's not going to be the same. I still want my kid to be brought up the way mum and dad was brought up.

Jabin: As much as we say we don't believe in culture, I'd still... I kinda do believe... No, I'd say, I wouldn't say culture takes over my life. But I would like my child to have that kind of upbringing.

Nasmin: I am, I think I will be alright. If I had the choice, I don't think it's going to change... How is it going to change the way I am? We're still going to follow Islam.

Jabin: No, but different food...

Naziyah: Stuff like that.

Nasmin: Then why do Chinese people and white people choose to get together?

Jabin: We wouldn't, though. We would choose not to do that.

Naziyah: No but they eat the same food, they eat... white, English food.

Jabin: The culture's not the same, isn't it?

Tasnim: Sometimes...

But then the culture is really important?

[More baby talk]

Would you ever considering marrying someone who's not from Bangladesh?

Tasnim: I wouldn't marry someone who's from Bangladesh. From somewhere else, yeah, it's possible.

For you it wouldn't be a problem?

Tasnim: Yeah. It just depends on, I don't know, it depends on... if they're Muslim.

[More baby talk]

Nasmin: There's too much going on here.

Yeah, you said it would be crazy here, but I didn't expect this crazy.

Nasmin: Eventful evening.

[More baby talk]

Interview 11: Nazmul (15), Jacob (16) and Hadi (17)

10/11/2014

Location: Khatun family home, Angel

Appointment through Nasmin Ali, research participant n° 1.

Tasnim (13) also present

Family details: Nazmul and Jacob are the brothers of Nazmin (12) and Tasnim (13).

Hadi is Nazmin's husband and Nasmin Ali's brother.

Tasnim: You need to fill in the other half of the conversation that your wife just had.

Because of all the baby talk.

Hadi: Should be fun.

So, basically, I went to Bangladesh in April. I went for three weeks, to Dhaka, Sylhet... And now I'm here for one month – this is my next-to-last day, actually – to get the London side of the story, so that's why I've been talking to your sisters and sisters-in-law. Basically, what I've been doing research on is how people born here still feel about Bangladesh, what do they associate with it, stuff like that. I don't know, how long has it been for you guys since the last time you went?

Jacob: Ehm. Hmpf. Whatever, ten, eleven years.

Tasnim: Same time as me.

Jacob: Yeah.

Nazmul: I went last year. So I was there about a year ago.

Was it a long holiday?

Nazmul: No. Well, we went because, erm, my granddad passed away. So we took his body back. I was there for about two weeks. Yeah. What about you, how long?

Hadi: It must be about thirteen years ago, now, I was there for about three months. Yeah. For my dad, really. Yeah.

Three months, that's a long time.

Hadi: Yeah, long, I had to get out there for a long bit.

Tasnim: It was a lot of time.

Hadi: It wasn't really a holiday, just to get out of the area, at least when I was a bit younger. But yeah. Nice place to be. Takes you back to your roots, as well.

And how important are these roots to you?

Hadi: Very, I think very. Especially when you're a lot younger when you out there. Because I remember, I was young and I went there, I remember, I saw animals that I never saw here,

running around. And just like how, when you go out there, and everyone just... loves you, 'cause you're from this country. It was a nice little experience. But I wouldn't go there every year. I wouldn't be going there every year. One, it's too expensive. To get out there it's a 800 pound flight, and even your accommodation there, [...] about the same amount of... money. Plus, obviously, if you got family members that you've seen there from when you were young, it's good, but obviously, a lot of people are getting older now, passing away, so it's not really a nice experience for me to go there and obviously see where they used to be and it brings back memories and stuff, so yeah. Probably go there in five years.

Because Nasmin [his sister] said you don't have much family.

Hadi: Yeah, not anymore, yeah.

Nazmul: I think, for me, for me, when I went there last year, I think the thing that really stuck out for me was the sort of connection you feel. Especially because, where we live, the village that we live, both my mum and my dad grew up, just there. And obviously, so did their parents and their parents before them. So, when you get there, you feel this sense of belonging. I mean, it's not the same sort of attachment that, say, you have to London. We grew up here, we have certain ideas and certain ways of putting things into context. Like, you could be out late at night and you could know why the street is quiet, and you don't have that sort of... context when you are in Bangladesh. However, you get the feeling of... a different kind of feeling of belonging. Not, not to the point where you... I mean, you don't yearn to live there, but when you're there, you feel like, "this is where we should be," do you know what I mean? But yeah. But that, that, that, I suppose, comes from the fact that, you know, you see the fields where your parents worked on. My dad, where he used to work, and where my grandfather is buried, and things like that. So you, you have genuine connections to those bits of land, and in geographical terms, that's where, you know, it resonates with you a lot. But, generally speaking, the country, it's a shock. Because you go there, and you have a sense of... You know, you have a way of living here, and because everything there is so different, the poverty and sort of, your close family. So you have, say, aunts and uncles in this country who live a certain lifestyle, and you have aunts and uncles... related to us in the exact same way, but leading a completely different lifestyle. They've not been introduced to so many things that we see here or our family sees here, but you realize they are, you know, equally related to you, but have, you know, several problems themselves. So that's obviously something that really, really sticks out when you're in Bangladesh. And I suppose that's where culture sort of comes in and you sort of think about the differences of the lifestyles that you've had between the two places.

I see you, Jacob, nodding a lot. Do you agree with him?

Jacob: Yeah man. I agree with him, I agree with what he says. 100%. Yeah. I, I was quite young when I last went so I don't really remember a lot about it. Just remember it being hot.

Nazmul: Yeah, it's impressive how much they get done in the heat. You know, it, it really is, it really and truly is. You know, of course you're accustomed to the heat because you've lived there your whole life, but, nonetheless, it's still hugely impressive to see the work that they get on. The fact that they can still sort of, you know, kind of, hold down a normal conversation, they've got several issues going on, you know, whether it's about money or where they're gonna get food from, you know, or the lack of infrastructure, or health care, or school. But they can still have a normal conversation with you because they've become so accustomed to it, they don't know any better. So that's pretty impressive, the resilience that they show. But, aside from that, you know,

ultimately, it's a tough place... It's a tough place to visit, because, I mean, it's, it's, it's one of the... It's the classic saying of "always be thankful of what you have because there are those out there who have less and they're still happy". So you go out there, and you see, and you, you, you, you immediately become very appreciative for the things that you've got in your own country because... One thing wrong here, I mean, one, one decision here, over there, is the reason why I ended up in this country and my cousins... as opposed to the other way around so... In that sense, you look at it, and you feel very grateful.

Do you talk to your cousins a lot?

Nazmul: Not really, I mean, I'm not talking about one particular cousin, I'm talking about, yeah, my extended family.

Just family in general?

Nazmul: Yeah, exactly, because... You know, there's... There's... My dad is one of three brothers. But both his sisters are still in Bangladesh. So all three brothers are here, living, you know, what is arguably a comfortable life, erm, compared to both of his sisters who, if you were to be perfectly honest, who aren't living a comfortable life, certainly not to the degree that their brothers are. These are, you know, what do you call it, siblings that come from the same mother, but they're in completely different parts of the world, living lives that are completely different, on the opposite end of the spectrum. You know, I was actually telling a friend the other day, what my dad probably makes in a month, you know, my aunts probably wouldn't make in a year. Or even two years. And that gap is so big now, there's no point in trying to bring them closer together. I mean, no one, no one really has the initiative or, what do you call it, the enthusiasm to even do that. So... I suppose that's the way things... I mean, that's probably a story very similar to anyone you ever speak to. You have really close family back home, living very close to poverty if not in poverty. You're in London, living a life of... Not extravagance but certainly a lot of luxury. I mean, just hot water alone. You know. That's enough to sort of set you apart from them.

Are these things also things you think about a lot?

Jacob: Yeah, definitely. When I was there, it's like... a treat for them to watch TV.

Nazmul: Uh huh.

Jacob: And if they want to watch TV, there's one TV in the whole village, everyone would just call, they will just come, they'd be there all together. For example, when I was there, they all watch it together. It's not like, people just lock their doors when they got a TV. Everyone, everyone's more than welcome. You've seen it, their doors are always open. Anyone's popping in anywhere. Yeah, just getting neighbours and neighbours pop in all the time.

And you guys have your big flatscreen TV just here in the room.

Jacob: Yeah, exactly.

Nazmul: There's a stronger sense of community there. I mean, that's not always a great thing. Because, I mean... To some degree, privacy is, isn't... Everyone talks about everyone and everyone wants to be a part of everyone's life. But there is a greater sense of community than there is here. I suppose it is... It's a good thing and a bad thing. Here, here you can afford privacy, you can do things on your own terms, without others questioning your decisions. Even down to the most minor choices, you're able to make them independently. There, it's more codependent.

And, you know, if one of your actions affects the whole village, and then, in turn, the whole village is affected, the decision made by the whole village affects you. So you're trying to find that sort of balance. For them, of course, some people grew accustomed to that sort of lifestyle, those sort of choices. That's probably one of the big things that I think I would struggle with if we were living in Bangladesh. Or, you know, one of the things I'm most grateful for in this country: the privacy or the freedom to act how you want to act, without having others judging your decisions or your choices. You know, that, I suppose, comes from the idea of rural villages and the lack of wider governmental, sort of, overview. It's, it's a balancing act. But they seem to enjoy it. I mean, everyone knows everyone. It's quite refreshing sometimes, to be on other people's minds and things like that. So, you know...

Jacob: Yeah. I haven't got a lot to say. I don't know a lot about Bangladesh.

You have a different relationship to the country?

Jacob: No, no. It's not like that. It's like...

Nazmul: You're more British?

Jacob: Possibly.

Nazmul: What would you say, man, if you got stopped by the police?

Jacob: I'd say I'm British, isn't it?

Nazmul: I'd suppose you'd say British Bangladeshi.

Jacob: Yeah, I'd say British Bangladeshi.

Tasnim: Yeah, we all said British Bangladeshi.

Nazmul: Obviously, 'cause it's where you're born. But obviously, if you know, if you know the system, they'd refer to you as British. And then they add on... British isn't a term.

Tasnim: Usually, at work, we'd, we'd be British Bangladeshi.

Nazmul: Yeah. Well, it's British, Asian, Black or Carribean. So...

Jacob: But I'm gonna have to keep it moving. It's been lovely and that.

Tasnim: You're going out?

Jacob: Yeah, I'm gonna go out.

Thank you, thank you so much.

Nazmul: Yeah, I'll see you downstairs when this thing is over.

You obviously have thought about all of these issues. Do you get these impressions just through your visits?

Nazmul: Which particular impression? Or just the way Bangladesh is? Well, I'm always consciously aware of where I come from and so on, my identity, because it's important. I mean, it's not a case of trying to find out "Who am I?" or, you know, "Why am I here?" It's more a case of, you know, being aware of the situations that, you know, placed me here. Or, more importantly, haven't placed me there. You know? And I guess on the back of that, I have a

yearning of trying to do something a little bit more profound and meaningful, because, it is a... I guess, this isn't... this is an opportunity for you to sort of explore more, see more. I think the best way I put it to someone once was, well, my grandfather was a nightwatchman in Bangladesh. Not a particularly fancy job: you stay up all night, making sure no one robs someone else's house, in a hot country, where there's mosquitoes, in the middle of the night, he'd get bitten up... But the point was, he'd make a little bit of money so that he could feed his son. My dad used to work in the paddy fields, you know, as you would a man growing up in that country. You know, there was no particular ambition of him coming to this country or him staying there, he didn't really go to school.

[Phone rings]

It's my flatmates, I'll probably be leaving soon... They'll call back. So, what my research is about in particular, is news and how British Bangladeshis, born here, stay updated. How people still follow the news. Do you for example read about what is going on in Bangladesh? Stay up-to-date on what's happening?

Nazmul: Well, I'm aware of the government. That work that they do and what they don't do. I mean, I really love international... I read international news. I'm particularly focused on the work that the UN do and other big organisations like WHO and their impact on Bangladesh, and the impact Bangladesh has on their continent and perhaps the wider world. I mean, it's not a massive one. Historically speaking, Bangladesh is quite a young country in itself. It was only independent in the 70s. The war that they fought to get that independence and things like that... So yeah, I mean, when it comes to following the news... There's only a few big highlights from Bangladesh and a lot of it is the corruption that's there and the difficulties that they are facing. Also, the way that the governments have been let over the last decade or so...

Hadi: So sorry, I'm heading out.

Oh, OK, lovely meeting you.

Hadi: Yeah, sorry about that. I think you're doing a great job, you know. This should be us. You know what I'm saying, this should be us talking about our country to other people. But I think you're doing a great job.

Thank you.

Nazmul: I'll see you downstairs in a bit, alright?

[Phone rings again]

They're going to pick me up, that's easy. So I have a bit more time, if you do too?

Nazmul: Yeah, I'll be... Yeah, that's fine.

Sorry, I can't remember where we left off...

Nazmul: You were talking about your project and how it being about people following the news from Bangladesh. Erm. And then, I was talking about... So yeah, so... The news, the news right now in Bangladesh, or rather the stories about Bangladesh, it's always been dominated by party politics and the various issues that are there. I mean, corruption has obviously marred a lot of the confidence that the public have. One thing that I always found bizarre and really strange was, there are many people who die in Bangladesh because there are strikes and there are a lot of

riots and things like that. And they die in the name of these parties, these political parties, the BNP and then you've got the Awami League. And they die in the name of these parties. And there's statistics that came out, that, I think of every dollar, ninety cents of it is taken by... you know, members of the parties, you know, through corruption. And how you can support ANY party that is a part of this... in any form. It is just shocking, to the point where you pay the ultimate price, you give your life, it's unbelievable. But yeah. And I think those are the things... Because one commentator said, "I think the best way forward is for" ... because, you've got the two leaders, both these women, they've got some rich history. One is the husband, I'm sorry, the wife of General Zia, and the other is the daughter of Mujibur Rahman... Hasina, her father was Sheik Mujibur Rahman, one of the founders and members of the government in exile, in India, during the war. But they're a part of the old guard. A part of the old school. And for the country to move forward, you need to give up those posts, you need to move on and let new people move in, with fresh ideas. Thankfully, thankfully, Bangladesh... Its composition right now, it's a pretty secular country. And it isn't marred in some of the the intricate political problems and ramblings that let's say Pakistan deals with. Although, they don't, similarly, they don't have the fire power that India has. They're somewhere in between, trying to... I mean, they're still struggling for an identity, trying to find a way forward. The United Nations only... I think a year ago, they had.. I think it a year ago? Maybe a little bit longer. They were... No, it was the IMF or the World Bank. Someone was going to give a lot of money to Bangladesh, to invest in infrastructure. And, once the... Once all the arrangements had been made, it was now time for contracts to be signed by big construction firms. Now there was a lot of corruption involved in these contracts, because they're huge, tens of millions, possibly hundreds of millions. Because they were so huge and so expensive, only a few companies could obviously do it because of the logistical complications, the logistical requirements to be able to do something like that. However, because the corruption was so high and the government was doing nothing to ease this, the IMF asked for complete and utter transparency, which wasn't afforded to them. They removed the funds. They revoked any... And they reneged on the deal. Well, I wouldn't say they reneged, "reneged" suggests almost the IMF decided not to give it. But they were right in not giving it because they realized the money wouldn't go to the right place. Those are probably the biggest issues that our country faces, generally speaking, on a wider scale. It's the fact that we can't... we haven't haven't got the infrastructure. We have some. I mean, Dhaka's not bad, you've seen it, some of the roads and stuff. But I'm sure you've also seen the congestion. You know. The lack of... No one's bothered by traffic lights. Which I just find quite shocking. They might as well not be there. There's like crossings on roads and no one bothers to use them, well, no one stops for them. It's just crazy. It's things like that that need to change. And education. People need to be educated. And those are the bigger problems. Those are the things that really need to be focused on. I mean, Hopefully, eventually, somebody will get round to solving these issues, but these are problem the things that put us in such an... entanglement. It's disappointing because, you look around at your family there and one of the reasons they're not better off is because they're not afforded some of the luxuries that the rich have. We think the gap between rich and poor in this country is big. You go over there and it's probably ten times as big.

So why do you choose to follow all of this through international news and international organisations? Rather than Bangladeshi news sources?

Nazmul: Ehm. I suppose accessibility is the main reason why. Also, I guess, like here, we have a better understanding of the context of some newspapers: are they right wing newspapers or left wing newspapers? I don't quite have that knowledge of the newspapers in Bangladesh, so, I

mean, when someone's pushing an agenda and I'm reading a news article, I can work that out. I mean, if I'm reading The Telegraph or The Sun, you know where they're going with this or what they're trying to imply with this, trying to suggest. You can read the subtext. With Bangladeshi newspapers, you can't do that. Also, it's in Bengali. I mean, my Bengali is not bad. I can read and write pretty well. Erm. However, still, it's a different style of writing, and it's a different... So, I mean, you know, I would still prefer to read it from sources that are a little bit more credible and a little bit more, you know... And I rather read it from sources that are a little bit more reliable, ones that I've had better luck with in the past when it comes to other things. So yeah. And the BBC did it... didn't interview, in fact, I think this was nearly three years ago, when the president or the prime minister of Bangladesh at the time... And it was around the time the Olympics were happening. She decided to fly over and was taking part in all of this, erm, international, what do you call it? Comradery that the Olympics bring on. And then the journalist was asking her some really difficult questions about the state of Bangladesh, about the fact that once this infrastructure deal broke down, why didn't she use her powers to make open some of the letters that were being exchanged between the companies, the infrastructure companies, and the ministers in the government, in the transport ministry. And I think it was the first time I've ever seen her questioned with such vigor and such, you know, such, what you call it? What's the word? Someone, someone... Yeah, the first time she was being interviewed where there was accountability. Where like someone was looking to hold her accountable for her office. That type of commentary, that just doesn't exist in Bangladesh, no one, no one sits around, trying to get to the bottom of a story or trying to... trying to commentate on the situation, you know, as it is. You know, the stark, bare truth of it. Because, ultimately, everyone's being paid off by someone. There is a reason why, you know... It's unfortunate. But it's difficult because there is a lot of money involved in these conversations. Not much in comparison to let's say America or Russia. However, ten million or twenty million is still twenty million pounds. There is an incentive to do it, you know. It's a shame, because, someone stealing, say, twenty million pounds from America isn't the same as someone stealing twenty million pounds from Bangladesh, because it means a lot more to these people. Also, it's a lot harder to collect taxes, there's hardly any infrastructure... I mean, sorry, any administrative procedures or policies put in place that properly govern these things. Police can be bought off just as easily as they can, you know... They can be on your side as easily as against you. There is no idea of protection or you know, you know, protect and serve. There is no, there is no... there is no sort of novelty behind any of this. It's all driven by something. I mean, in countries like this, there's sense of mentality. We, we, we, this country does a great job of trying to look after the weak. And I think that's... that's how society works. That's what society generally is about. It's about... I mean, I guess the best way of sort of looking at society, like how good the society is, is by how good they look after their weak, the most vulnerable. And countries like this, they don't do a bad job. You know. Most European countries are OK. I mean, we have a national health care, I mean it's not great, it's got its own problems, but it does a decent enough job. We have welfare. And in Bangladesh, the money that's been stolen, would've probably been used, well, I would've hoped that someone would suggest using it for welfare or trying to, you know, reinvigorate edu... children's education.

Do you discuss these kinds of ideas with your friends?

Nazmul: Some friends. Friends from university, definitely. We all have a similar interest, similar ideas. But this is probably interesting enough... I don't discuss this with many Bengali people. I mean, Bangladeshis. Most of my friends are... from university anyway, they're a variety of races. I mean, particular, most of them are English... Or at least from English descent, somewhere. So

yeah, it's odd, because, yeah, I don't ever see myself as... I guess there's a lot of apathy there. There's not an interest. Isn't it? Especially, say, the broader issues. There may be a specific thing that may have happened in the villages and, "Oh have you heard this story?", and so and so... That can ignite a conversation. However, the broader issues, the fundamental problems with Bangladesh, there isn't... I guess that could perhaps originate from the lack of information that comes out of the country. I mean, if there was something that was particularly atrocious that was happening in our country, we would hear about it, it would be reported a little bit more than, say, the bad things that are happening throughout our government. Or even the good things that are happening in our government... Those things don't get reported as widely. Erm. But, I've always found that was because of perhaps the greater world, the wider world isn't interested. It's not interesting enough. It doesn't, it doesn't, it doesn't... Erm. I mean, the thing with media is, and sort of, news reporting, there has to be... Every article that you read, I mean, unless it's, say, specific to that, say if it was a magazine about Bangladesh, then, then fine, of course all their articles would be about that. Generally speaking, media likes to look at stories that are interesting, entertaining. Because, a lot of them now... I mean, you know, we've got the big ones. For example, I'll give you a good example of when media reported something from Bangladesh in recent years. In fact, I was in Bangladesh at the time when it was being reported. It was the factory.

Rana Plaza?

Nazmul: The plaza, the factory. Erm. And since then, do we hear anything from Bangladesh, in the media, in the widely reported--? No, because those things aren't interesting or entertaining. Those things aren't shocking. That story did have shock value to it. And you, you, you find it while when they do report stories like that, they all throw in bits about Bangladesh, you know, the state of it. They'll talk about, you know, poverty or whatever, but they'll only glance at it, they won't... they'll look at it. But, you know, as I said, someone needs to be, someone needs to have an invested interest in Bangladesh's welfare or, you know, its care, before they go ahead and they report it. But no one particularly does. Because they've got other things to report. They've got so many things they could talk about, say, the money that's getting out of Bangladesh, they could be talking about something else that is happening somewhere else in the world. Unfortunately, we're quite low down on the picking order because it's not important enough.

Not even here in Britain? Where there's a lot, there's a huge Bangladeshi community?

Nazmul: Yeah. Well. You would've... Well, see, this is the thing. We, as a community, so, when Bangladeshis came over here around the time that the war was happening and a number of years before, when they were coming over, there was a huge sense of you know, homesickness, you know, love for their country. But then when you realize the second generation... and I'm a second generation Bangladeshi... My parents are immigrants, they immigrated to this country, but I didn't. And... So then, now what we have is a generation, growing up, who haven't seen Bangladesh in the same way that their parents did... So, their interests don't lie with what Bangladesh is about, their interests lie with the things that, you know, would sort of bother or excite a teenager or, you know, an adult; like university, or work, and things like that. And you'll see, by third generation or even fourth generation, that, that that will completely go, because... One thing that my mum, my mother is incredibly keen on, is the sense of identity. "You speak Bengali to your children". My sister has a child, "Speak Bengali to him". "Make sure it lives on". That is why my mum was really keen on that I learned to read and write Bengali.

Would you also teach your children if you had any?

Tasnim: Your brother just called to ask you to come... out.

Nazmul: Well, I'll call him, I'll call him. That's fine. I know what he wants. So. Erm. Probably. I don't know. I mean, I think for me, for me more than cultural... I mean, I think there's been a huge gap between, say, the way I grew up... I mean, as I was saying, my grandfather was a nightwatchman, my dad, he worked in the fields, he came here to this country by pure luck, and then I was born here. But my grandfather's mother, she used to beg on the streets in Bangladesh. And you look and that's four generations from where I am today. You know, I just graduated with a law degree from UCL. And it's a huge, huge difference, you know. So I would like to think my children would. But, I wouldn't, I don't know... I don't know if I'll speak Bengali to them. Maybe, possibly, depends, I guess, on my wife as well. It will depend on that aspect of the relationship. But, probably. I would like to think so. I mean, they'll certainly speak Bengali to some degree. Whether they would read and write it... I mean, it took a lot, to teach me. It's not easy. It's just... On top of, you know... school. Maybe. Would be nice. It wouldn't be, it wouldn't be imperative, or necessary. And I suppose, you know, that says something about the way things are going, culturally. But you need to, you need to form some sort of relationship with Bangladesh, perhaps go there when you're really young or... Be aware of where you came from, if you really want to sort of embrace the culture. But it's tough.

And you think that's changing over the generations?

Nazmul: Definitely. I think, I think, as I said, I give it, probably another generations, I mean, another two generations, and then it'd almost certainly be wiped out. Because, well you've got to remember, two generations you're talking about, maybe fifty-odd years, and in fifty years' time, the people that came here in the early seventies, aren't gonna be around. And their children might not even be around. So... You're losing huge chunks of history and knowledge. And if those things aren't being passed down... And purely down to the fact that... Not for the want of trying but because people are apathetic, "Why would I want to sit and listen to stories about Bangladesh when, you know, I could be doing seven other things that interest me more?" You know, "I know you're from Bangladesh, mum, but I'm not, I wasn't born there, I speak English". It's that kind of culture clash... I mean, it's sad, but on the, on the flip side, there are always people coming here from Bangladesh, so in that sense... But definitely, I think, if you go to any part of the world, if you move there, and you stay there for a long enough period of time, you will slowly lose the identity that you came from. Because you're forming a new one. Some people who are doing a good job in trying to match them together, but even then, it's a difficult process of, you know, what do I retain and what do I drop? What are the good things and what are the bad things? Yeah, but, definitely, over the years, that will get worse and worse. Yes, worse and worse.

What role does your religion play in your identity?

Nazmul: Erm. I think... See, this is the thing, religion is probably the reason... I mean, I, personally, for me personally, what role does religion play in my culture? Not a particularly big one. I like the idea of the two being separate. I think they're not separate, I like the idea of them being separate. I don't think Bengalis have done a particularly good job of isolating the two. I think the culture, the...

[Nazmin comes in]

Nazmin: Hi. How are you?

Nazmul: She's attention seeking.

Nazmin: Shut up, man.

[...]

Nazmul: It's, it's... Bengalis... The culture that we live in doesn't do a great job of separating the two or isolating what is, say, a religious reason to do something, and what is, say, a cultural reason to do something. For me, I try to keep the two as separated as possible, but culture isn't imposed just by myself, it's about those who are around me. There are huge, huge, what you call it? Sorry... There are easily identifiable things, what do you call it? My mother would say they could easily be seen as religious but you realize they're just cultural, or vice versa. She says something that's cultural but it's actually religious, you know. For example, I'm left handed, and they have a huge thing about me trying to use my right hand. Because, what do you call it? We're not to use our right hand... Erm, sorry, we're not to use our left hand, for anything... And it almost feels like a religious thing. But of course it stems from tradition and you know, just a cultural... It's a worldwide sort of thing.

In Belgium as well. Not right now, obviously.

Nazmul: Yeah, of course, many years ago, yeah. Erm. So things like that. They just stick with them. You see a lot of tension in our region in Bangladesh, is religiously based... Personally, I'm very secular, I don't like the idea of state getting involved... And I think Bangladesh is trying to do a good job, better than Pakistan, definitely. Erm. And I think, I think, that's one of its, what do you call it? Inspiring things. I also like the idea that there are two women in charge, at the top. I like that idea. I don't think they're the greatest women to be in charge, but I like the idea that the country doesn't hold women back from the top positions. And in that sense, culture hasn't... Religion hasn't really imposed itself there. Today... Then again, Malaysia, is it? Yeah, I think it's Malaysia, who has one of the highest populations of Muslims in the world, has a woman in charge as well. You know... I mean, well, yeah, it definitely does, it makes a huge difference, the impact that you, your, of your actions, are heavily scrutinized based on those two things, religion and culture. Erm. As I was saying earlier about how, in the village, you have that idea of people judging you all the time, that sentimentality, that sort of... Those sentiments come from deepseated, erm, religious views that have now, sort of, slowly, polluted cultural aspects, so every action is scrutinized and judged and, you know, what do you call it? Looked at, over and over again. But it's because of religion that that happens. Then I suppose a sense of freedom is lost in countries like that, because, eventually, once you bring the two together, especially Islam, it's not, erm, I mean, I wouldn't say, I wouldn't say it's a reclusive religion, erm, it's... though at the same time I wouldn't say it's free-thinking. I wouldn't say it allows for... I don't think it's particularly oppressive, I mean, it doesn't have an impression of being oppressive. Well, I'm Muslim. And I guess the country where we grew up allows me to practice my religion in a way that is comfortable to me, and not be judged, yet judged at the same time... I think that's the big difference between here and Bangladesh, in those cultural senses, the religion oppresses... Religion's sort of, you know... The culture, mixed together with the religion, erm, doesn't allow for growth in the way that, say, here, the culture, and the religion, when even put together, allows for growth because, you're... I mean here... I mean there, it's almost, you know, there's sort of, you know... Here, there, here it's almost sort of, you know, they're mutually exclusive... they're not mutually exclusive. There, it seems like... Well, here, you can have two, you can have

both. There, it almost seems like you have to put both together, if you want to sort of, you know, live and work in a society there. I mean, for example, it almost feels cultural that women walk behind the men, several steps behind the men, in Bangladesh. However, at the same time, those things aren't religiously necessary in Islam. However, they almost feel like that because culture has sort of brought that idea up. So, what you call it? A father won't walk beside his daughter. I found it very odd when I used to see my own cousins do it. I go like, "Why do you do that?" And she goes, "Oh, it's just not allowed". "What, religiously or culturally? Are you sure?" And then I don't question it any further, it's obviously something that they... that's widely accepted there. But things like that, it's something that I found really odd and really strange, but it's of course, once you put those two together, it became very, it becomes, erm... there is no breathing, there is no growth there. Here, you put religion, and you put free thinking together, and you can create wonderful things. But there... That's probably how I would put it, if you would ask me about culture and religion and how the two sort of affect each other. That's probably the biggest one, not allowing the other to grow... in a positive way.

Doesn't it all depend on the interpretation?

Nazmul: Of the religion? See, this is probably it, though. Religion, ultimately, is down to interpretation. We're reading scripture. Like, I mean, you and I can both read the same book, the same words, the same formation... However, we can go away with two different opinions. Because you're related to one character or you liked one theme that I did or didn't. And that's exactly how it is with religion. And it almost seems like such a simplistic approach by saying, "Well, you know, yeah, I don't, well, we're cherry picking here" – but you're not, because certain words can mean certain things to you. So that will in turn make you act in a certain way. It's not one size fits all. It's... We are who we are, we're a product of, you know, the people around us. Including the Holy Book and how we read it. That's a product of our surroundings. But that's one of many things that makes us up... Say, for example, we hear from the Qur'an that you're allowed to hit your wife or you're allowed to, you know, erm... It's... You've got to be aware of the context and the time at which this was written and that these things are clearly not applicable in society today, because we have a different way of looking at it.

Tasnim: Are you guys alright? 'Cause mum wants to go soon.

Nazmul: Oh, so then we're gonna have to finish up here, but it was lovely talking to you.

Interview 12: Lepina Begum (18)

11/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar close to Lepina's work, Tottenham

Appointment through an event at Bengali History Week, an initiative of Brick Lane Circle, where I addressed her and asked her to participate in my research.

You said you're studying here?

No, I'm working here, I work at the university, yeah. Just student support work, kind of administrative.

A lot of crying students who have to much work or mostly the administrative side?

It's both, it's dealing with all the undergrads, postgrads, research students as well, so PhD students, and then all of the academics... erm. And then all of the system side, process work basically. It's starts to slow down a bit now, so it's okay.

I can understand, in the beginning of the year, it must be crazy.

Yeah, it was. Ha ha. It's fine now. Exams are in the summer, just in the summer, and then there's resit exams for undergrad students so...

That's why it was so crazy.

Yeah. That was around sort of September.

I'm a student as well, so you're supporting me in a way, too. I'm doing my Masters in Conflict and Development. With that program, we went to Bangladesh last April. We went to Dhaka, Sylhet, Bogra, the Sundarbans. [...] Did you ever go to Bangladesh?

Yeah, I went--

'Cause you were born here, right?

Yeah, I was born here. So I've been a few times when I was quite young and then I went about four years ago, on a voluntary placement. So like a diaspora volunteering scheme. And I was part of BRAC. You've heard of BRAC? You've probably seen them when you were in Dhaka. They're the largest southern NGO in the world. It's for Building Resources And Communities, but everyone knows them as BRAC.

What made you decide to go?

Erm. So I was... I was sort of looking for volunteering for a while, and then this scheme came up, and when I came across it, applied to do it. And then through them, I went on the scheme. So it was basically an opportunity to send British Bangladeshi to go... professionals, to volunteer in Bangladesh. Erm. So there was lots of different kind of schemes. So if you were a... Luckily we were all professionals... There was lots of volunteers, actually. And they put them into a placement which was to do with law and... All professionals. To sort of "give back" in that sense. And then I went and I worked with another charity, who was sort of a joint partner with BRAC. They work with women in about ten different districts. There were widows, divorced... They

don't basically have a male companion or a male family member. It was part of that charity, it was, to support them, on delivering needs assessments, and translating that to case studies. So that was my sort of role. But it was only for about a month.

How did you come in contact with that particular NGO?

With the NGO... Because there's a base here, so there's a UK-branch office, when they were advertising. A friend of mine works... used to work for the government at the time, she came across the scheme. And then she told me about it.

She's also a British Bangladeshi?

Yes, she is. That's how I heard.

You and I met at the Brick Lane Circle event, for Bengal History Week. I don't know if that something you do often, attend such lectures?

No, that was the first time I've been to that... Circle. I've come across it before when they've done other events and exhibitions as well. But Jebi [Rahman], who was chairing it, she's part of BRAC. So she was our coordinator who, you know, went with all the volunteers and did the placement thing. So that's how I came across it.

And other events that are similar to Brick Lane Circle events?

Yeah, there's other professional sort of networks, erm, what's it called, it's called Brit Bangla Network, it's like British Bangladeshi professionals. I think last year or the year before they hosted like a fundraiser and that was during the, during the New Year. And it was post-floods. It was part of, erm, a fundraiser scheme that would do water aid. So it's good times, sort of get together with other professionals, network with other professionals. What they do, erm, they sort of discuss the history of Bangladesh. And the plan since then and the floods. And how to sort of give back and volunteer. And they do the fundraising. That's sort of what they do. It's a good way to kind of meet other professionals as well.

Would you consider yourself up-to-date on everything that is happening in Bangladesh?

Erm. Not... not so much, but in terms of news, watching, sort of news on erm... the media that's here, the newschannels. That's as far as I go I think. But even then it's very basic.

You watch those newschannels?

Yes.

And how did you come across them at first? Do your parents watch them as well?

Yeah, they do so. I guess they understand a bit more than me, but. You know, we see a lot of, you know, the updates you hear, like the strikes--

Hartals, yes.

Yeah, we saw that when we were in Bangladesh back in 2010 and at the time, when I was travelling, that was during the... a visit to... the Chittagong Hill Tracts. So, well it was during that weekend, I wasn't in town. I did perceive the sort of effect of the strike, like they were burning things and luting everything all over Dhaka, which was quite bad. But I was in Chittagong. So there, there was a small sort of outburst. We were sort of in the town. But people-- it wasn't that

big. So people still going about their sort of day to day and the entire, you know, the town wasn't shut down completely like in the way Dhaka was in a way. But it was happening there, my friend who was in the hotel, she had to stay in the hotel, they told her she couldn't leave because it was really bad in the street. So in a way, I was quite glad that I was out of town [Dhaka] at the time. But yeah, it looks quite bad. Like every now and again there's always some sort of an uprising or violence which is quite bad.

Is there a particular reason why you follow it?

I think it's a result of having visited Bangladesh, because I saw a bit of it and came across it. The people that I worked with, you know, they had an interest in politics. Obviously, it's their day to day life, and they would talk about day to day riots and how it affects them. And I think if you engage with Bangladesh, in that sense that you've been, then you would take an interest in the sort of politics and the news and everything. Because, we still have family that are there. And even people that live in Dhaka so a lot of the people that I worked with, when you see the sort of political conflict, you would be sort of, you know, taking an interest in knowing what's happening.

Are you still a lot in contact with the family you have there?

Yeah, but it's different because they're not based in Dhaka, so the conflict isn't as bad where they're based, in Sylhet, in the district and everything. But again, you know, it's... you know, the ruling party, depending on who it is, still does effect... you know, countrywide.

And you would talk to them about that?

Not so much, I think my family do a bit more, erm, because obviously for them, it's day to day struggles with other challenges, you know, it's sort of health and hospitals and so on and things like that. And it's, they're not politically active in a way. I guess, in that sense, it's not related too much with my family. But it's more of a sort of... the politics is more in terms of the professionals that I worked with in Bangladesh in that sense.

Are a lot of your friends also British Bangladeshis?

Here? No. I think it's a mix, because, where I grew up, because there was erm... It's a lot more diverse. I grew up in Islington, so that's, you know, not far from here [Tottenham]. And working a lot in Central London. It's very sort of mix. So I think, erm, a few of my friends are, but the rest are mixed, from different backgrounds.

Now you still live in Islington?

No, I live in Camden.

So, also North London?

Yes, North London.

If someone were to ask you, where are you from, what would you say? Just someone random, on the street.

Just someone random... It's different now, because I think, I say... It changed over the years. Before I used to say, "I'm from London" or "I'm from here", erm. And then, you see, the next question they say is, "Where are you really from?", so they all just go, you know, your ethnicity,

“Bangladesh”. But when you’re around sort of places, like SOAS, which is a very international place, everyone is always from somewhere else. So they always want to know, “Where are you really from?” in a way. So I generally, now, I just say “British Bangladesh”. I’d say, “My family are from Bangladesh but I was raised here”.

How important is your religion for your identity? Being a Muslim?

Erm. I think it pretty much is my identity.

Do you speak Bangla?

I speak, yeah, I speak Bangla at home, so with my parents, because they don’t really speak English. I mean, they speak it with people that speak English, but we don’t have that, erm, that form of communication. Obviously there’s various words in English, that we would say, if we don’t know how to translate, we say it, it becomes a common sort of thing. With my parents and with relatives and elderly relatives, it’s all in Bangla. But, I think otherwise I’d go-- But with my friends, not very much.

And, do you have siblings?

With my siblings, we will speak in English. My nieces and nephews, yeah.

And, if you were to have children, I don’t know if already have children?

No.

Would you teach them the language?

Yes. To the extent that I know. But in terms of sort of reading and writing, I’d probably have to bring in some professional help. I... I think my reading and writing has gone down a bit. But yeah.

But you want your child to know how to read and write it?

Yes. Yeah. Because I think, you know, it’s quite an asset to have, to be able to speak a second language. Erm. And I think, if you have a second language, it makes it a bit easier to learn other languages as well. So, yeah, I’d definitely want more than two. Because I’ve seen, what happens, when children now, like a lot of, my nieces and nephews, it strikes me, they speak English.

Only English?

Yeah. They just about understand it [Bangla] but sort of very basic. So they have a communication problem with my parents or with their grandparents. So I think it’s a bit of a shame and a big loss in that sense. So I really want to try and bring it back in a way.

Are you proud of your heritage?

Yeah, I think. Everyone’s born in a certain place, with a certain ethnicity, where you come from. So I think it’s good to be proud of where you’re from. And even, we don’t revive it a lot, in terms of heritage. But the more you learn about traditions, I think it’s good to... be happy where you’re from. In a way.

You learned a lot when you were visiting there?

Yeah, definitely. You see a lot more of the diversity than you see here. Because obviously, when you learn about migration and in different countries, the different forms of migration. The people from Bangladesh that are here are mainly from Sylhet. I think there's people from Chittagong and other places, but it's very, very small minority. Especially Sylheti. So there's quite a dense population from there. When you visit Bangladesh and you see the different sides to Bangladesh... You know, Bangladesh is known for quite... They fought for their independence. Because of language. So when you see other people, the different language they speak, the different dialects. So it's quite nice to see that. It's sort of mixed, a diversity, I think. Erm. And it's different because, I don't know how active it is in Bangladesh, because. You know, when you're here, all sort of people, all they consider, oh, Bangladesh is like a place where it floods all the time, it's a poor country. But when you go there, it's not. It doesn't flood all the time. Far from it. People are proactive. And it is growing. You can see how it's developing as well. Especially 'cause when you see a lot of... people in the country that make an actively doing things to make a difference for the people of the country. Then you know that, erm, as someone who lives in a Western country, we're seen as "Westerners", so living in a developed country. You know, they're not just waiting kind of for us to keep sending money. They're actively pursuing development themselves. Erm. So in that sense, it's good to see the country. You feel a lot more connected. You feel sort of proud in a, in a disconnected way I guess. We can't take credit for what people are doing there.

You said, disconnected, do you feel sad about that?

No, but in a way, yeah, I guess, in a way. Because it's different. When you're actually there and you participate and you're giving back to when you're an outsider and all you could do is, sort of, send money in a way, or try to take part in another type of campaigns or something.

Do you consider yourself an outsider?

Yes, I think so, yeah. I mean, I would, you, 'cause when I did go, you're seen as a tourist or a foreigner. Even if you're from there. And it's nice to take an interest and they ask you, "where are you from?", where your parents are from. But, you know, I've grown up here, I've been raised here, I work here. So in that sense, yeah, I'm not really an insider in that sense.

Do you know already when your next visit to Bangladesh would be?

I think, yeah, in the near future I think. I'd like to go back and work there.

As a volunteer or as a professional?

As a professional, I think. In terms of volunteering, I'd had to be making sure I was financially stable to stay for a while. I don't want to do, like, too sort of short term... Like last time I went was for about a month. Erm. But, sort of a bit longer would be really nice.

ANNEX II: RESEARCH OUTSIDERS: Summary of the encounters

In this second annex, I have included brief summaries of my encounters with research outsiders, i.e. British Bangladeshis whom I spoke to in the course of my field research, but that did not match the criteria. They belong to the second and third type of British Bangladeshis, or could be qualified as “other”.

- I. British Bangladeshi research participants who were born in London and are still living there
- II. British Bangladeshi research outsiders who were born in Britain, spent their (entire) childhood in Bangladesh and are now living in London
- III. British Bangladeshi research outsiders who were born in Bangladesh and are now living in London
- IV. Other

Most of these encounters were off the record. I therefore did not feel the need to transcribe those conversations that were on the record. Instead, I only included summaries of my experience with them, including their view on the news if the conversation allowed it (NEWS) and one particular thing that stood out (MOST INTERESTING THING).

WEEK 1: 13/10 UNTIL 19/10

Type II (research outsiders n° i-ii)	lxxxvi
Type III (research outsiders n° iii-vii)	lxxxvii
Other (research outsiders n° viii-ix)	xc

WEEK 2: 20/10 UNTIL 26/10

Type III (research outsider n° x)	xcii
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WEEK 3: 27/10 UNTIL 2/11

Type III (research outsiders n° xi-xii)	xciii
Other (research outsider n° xiii)	xciv

WEEK 4: 3/11 UNTIL 9/11

Type III (research outsider n° xiv)	xcv
Other (research outsiders n° xv-xvi)	xcv

WEEK 5: 10/11 UNTIL 12/11

Type III (research outsider n° xvii)	xcvi
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FIRST WEEK

TYPE II

Shahed (i)

16/10/2014

Location: Bar near Tower Hill

Met through couchsurfing.org

Shahed is 29 years old. He is an only child. He was born in Manchester, then moved to Dhaka when he was 6 (as his father is a professor, and he got offered a job at Dhaka University), then moved back to NORTH London. His parents still live in Dhaka. His father is sick now. He thinks health care is one of the best things about England.

NEWS: He knows a lot about Bangladesh but he doesn't follow the news because it makes him angry. He feels anger because of the hypocrisy, the corruption, and the bad politics. "I don't care!"

MOST INTERESTING THING: Even though we got together in East London, this is not where he prefers to go. He chose North London "to get away from Bangladesh".

Nad (ii)

18/10/2014

Location: Walk near Saint Catherine's Docks

Met through couchsurfing.org

Nad was born in Scotland (Dundee) but soon after that, left for Bangladesh where he spent his childhood. Bangla is his mother tongue. Afterwards, he went to college in London and has been living here for 15 years now. He sees his identity as follows:

1. Bangladesh
2. London (he especially loves the tolerance – which is different than for example New York, in his opinion)
3. UK
4. Europe (almost took a job there when he was fed up with London and wanted to move to Europe (NOT Bangladesh) but fell in love with London all over again)

NEWS: He takes 15 minutes to go through the news before going to bed, as a reflex, but he is fed up with the news from Bangladesh because "the country is not going in the right direction". In his opinion, Bangladesh is in need of a French revolution. "Power corrupts." Nad's brother lives in Bangladesh. He analyses the news and helps Nad to keep up by giving him an interpretation. Nad is often worried about his brother; he cares about him and about his opinion, too.

MOST INTERESTING THING: Even though his brother still lives there, he feels less connected to Bangladesh now. Normally he goes to Bangladesh every 12-14 months but 2012 was the last time (to bury his father), next time will probably be January 2015 (because his brother got engaged). He is proud of being Bangladeshi, though, but then continues his remarks about all that is wrong with his "mother land".

TYPE III

Mahmud (iii)

Location and time frame: Since Mahmud is my flatmate, we've met for the first time on the 13th of October, and we usually talked at home (E14).

Met through spareroom.co.uk

Cf. **Interview 4**

Mahmud is my flatmate. He is 29 and moved from Dhaka to London eight years ago. He is married to Aisha, who's American, and they are expecting a baby. We live in Gough Walk, East London (near Westferry).

NEWS: He stays informed, especially through relatives who still live in Bangladesh (phone calls, facebook). If he reads Bangladeshi newspapers, he reads (online) newspapers from Bangladesh itself in English (for example Daily Star; he doesn't like reading Bangla), not the newspapers printed here in Britain. The reason for that is that these are typical Sylheti newspapers, which is not the region where he is from. He does not understand Sylheti and prefers to read in English either way. Also, he claims that Sylheti papers in London are poorly written: according to him, they contain a lot of grammar mistakes. In general, Mahmud is not very happy about what he reads. His opinion is that all political parties in Bangladesh are exactly the same: it does not matter whether BNP or Awami League are in power, they're equally corrupt. "Unless these two parties are totally moved out of power and a honest government is formed, made of educated and patriotic politicians, there will no no change."

MOST INTERESTING THING: He talked a lot about the difference between Sylhet and other parts of Bangladesh.

Montasir (iv)

Location and time frame: Since Montasir is my flatmate Mahmud's best friend, we've met for the first time on the 13th of October, and we usually talked at home (E14).

Met through Mahmud (research outsider n° iii)

Montasir moved to London about a decade ago. He is originally from Dhaka. He has been back three times since moving to London.

NEWS: He stays informed but is fed up with Bangladeshi politics and hartals. "Over the years I think people have learnt to live with them and go about their lives as best as they can. People are having to adjust all sorts of plans around these hartals. Exams taking place in the middle of the night, wedding ceremonies, work and school and so on. Life simply goes on somehow. Sometimes it gets a bit violent. But that's just how it is. People adjust around it. But I'm sure everyone wished they'd just stop. It's just a constant catch up game for everyone."

MOST INTERESTING THING: When we were talking about Bangladeshi politics, Montasir shared some memories about his struggle during the first years he was living in London. "Up until 2008 I was really confused if I should stay or go back. But here I am now, 11 years later. I feel a lot has changed back home. I only wish most of the changes could be accountable as positive. But I don't think that's entirely the case. Same old hartals and political infighting is taking away the focus of

so much unspent potential in the country. How people are achieving success the midst of all this is quite astonishing really.”

Amin (v)

14/10/2014

Location: Westminster

Met through couchsurfing.org

Amin grew up in Bangladesh but moved to Belgium (he has the Belgian nationality) and lived there for 10 years. He also lived in Spain and in other places. Now he has lived in London for a little while. Amin wanted to meet up very badly. He talked a lot, first about Bangladesh, then about his kin still living there (father died), then a lot about Belgium and how he stalked his ex-girlfriend and now needs legal advice.

NEWS: He stays informed.

MOST INTERESTING THING: He does not necessarily have a connection to England. He does like London a lot, especially the anonymity and tolerance: “We can just walk here and no one would look up.”

Mainuddin (vi)

15/10/2014

Location: Bar near Westferry

Met through couchsurfing.org

Shuvro is 24, he works in Canary Wharf and lives very close to Westferry just like me. He was born in Bangladesh (Dhaka) and has studied in Madrid, Spain, before coming to London. Now he works very long hours in Canary Wharf.

NEWS: He stays informed.

MOST INTERESTING THING: Shuvro spend a lot of time explaining his views on Bangladeshi politics. He talked about Awami League, BNP and Jamaat.

Salman (vii)

19/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar near Whitechapel Galery

Met through couchsurfing.org

Salman has lived in London for five years now. He lives near Limehouse, there he lives at home with parents + one (young) sister of seven. He grew up in the Sundarbans (city like Khulna but closer and more north to the Indian border) and has not been back since 2011. He is a shia Muslim. He works as a youth worker (very convenient for possible contacts), will start his PhD soon (in physics), he has his own business and cares after his sister. He sees his identity as equally divided between London and Bangladesh.

NEWS: As far as kin in Bangladesh goes, he has two grandparents left, and he receives updates through them. He was never a news junkie anyway but he follows some news. Bangladeshi channels on TV are sometimes on (at home).

MOST INTERESTING THING: His views about London were very interesting: people come and go, hard to make good friends (except for Shuvro, whom he's known all his life). Also, he talked a lot about the Sylheti youngsters he meets through his profession as a youth worker. "All they see of Bangladesh, is Sylhet. That's the only place they visit. Does this mean that they have a good idea about their 'mother country'? I think Sylhet is the most religious of all districts... This affects them."

OTHER

Aisha (viii)

Location and time frame: Since Aisha is my flatmate, we've met for the first time on the 13th of October, and we usually talked at home (E14).

Met through Mahmud (research outsider n° iii)

Cf. Interview 4

Aisha (24) is technically not a British Bangladeshi. She is an American (Georgia), living in Britain. Still, I wanted to include her because she relates to Bangladesh, since she married a Bangladeshi, knows the language, and is very interested in the life, the history, the (pop) culture and the fashion. She is a converted Muslim (her original name is Victoria) and claims she "aspires to be a British Bangladeshi hijabi model". She's pregnant and "can't wait to dress up her son and go to the mosque with him".

NEWS: Aisha claims she does follow the news on Bangladesh at times but she usually finds out through her husband (and he reads the Daily Star most of the time).

MOST INTERESTING THING: I found it fascinating how Aisha seems to be more interested in Bangladeshi culture than most other people I met during my stay in London.

Syed (ix)

17/10/2014

Location: Whitechapel Gallery

Met through couchsurfing.org

Syed is a second generation migrant, but he was born in Birmingham, so I cannot include him in my research. His family still lives in Birmingham, but he lives in East London now. He portrays himself as "a traveler with a very open mind"; he lived in Madrid, Barcelona, Amsterdam.

He has only been to Bangladesh two times: when he was 26 years old and when he went to bury his father (felt more connected after that because of the trauma of flying back to Bangladesh, alone with his father's body). As far as kin in Bangladesh goes, he knows who his family members are, they know who he is. Now, they have a bond through grieving. Also, he feels connected by watching for example wedding videos. He says he does not feel immersed in the culture, like his flatmate (cf. infra), but he certainly feels connected.

As far as his proficiency in Bangla goes, he emphasizes his Sylheti origin. He knows Sylheti but does not speak it with for example his siblings, so not with everyone at home. His flatmate's English isn't top notch so basically, he could be speaking Bangla with him as well, but he forces his flatmate to try and speak more English.

As far as religion goes, he is a liberal Muslim. Last year, he experienced his first Ramadan. I asked him whether he was interested in geopolitical events that affect Islam, like Gaza, since he was wearing a bracelet in support of Palestine the second time we met. Syed claims it has to do more with the humanitarian side, with him being there, than with its connection to Islam.

NEWS: He receives news through his first generation flatmate. Syed does not watch the channels, doesn't pick up the free newspaper ("I could but I don't"), but he feels an "unconscious connection" when hearing something about Bangladesh in mainstream news ("It's like *ping* - like when you hear your name you automatically look up, same with hearing about Bangladesh"). So he is aware of big events or visits. Also, he was aware of what had happened during the elections, since he was just there. He is aware of "the general political situation and of the corruption". When I spoke to Syed and his flatmate together, Syed said he's "grateful" for the time and the info he gathers through his flatmate. They don't see each other that often, but when they do, his flatmate talks about all the things that happened in the news and that is how he keeps up-to-date.

MOST INTERESTING THING: He called Bangladesh his "homeland" and mostly refers to it as "motherland". He used to say, "I'm from Birmingham" when people asked him where he was from, but now he's changing this (to Bangladesh) because of "history" ("it's my history"). I found this changing attitude very interesting. Also, he liked sharing his story, since he became more aware of identity through his (recent) second visit. His siblings have never been in Bangladesh but they might now.

SECOND WEEK

TYPE III

Muhammed (x)

25/10/2014

Location: East India Dock Walk

Met through Brick Lane Circle event

(we randomly started talking during the guided tour and since it was a very casual conversation, I am pretty sure he had no idea I saw this as an interview)

I met Muhammed during a guided tour organized by Brick Lane Circle on the East India Company around the docklands. He is from Sylhet, has two sisters still living there, two living here. He was particularly interested in the event because his father arrived here by boat in the early sixties, then went back because he saw no future in London, then Muhammed was born, and when Muhammed was twelve years old, they returned to London. Muhammed is recently married: he went back on holiday in August, met a girl there, after three weeks they got married. The girl is not here yet: she has been having problems with visa and immigration. Since his marriage, he went back once, but he complains of how expensive it is, especially if you want to fly directly into Sylhet. He sees his identity as follows:

1. Muslim
2. British
3. Bengal (Not Bangladesh because he prefers not to think in political entities, we are all part of one human family)

NEWS: He follows it but “prefers not to”, he feels kind of hopeless watching the news from here because of all the bad things going on in Bangladesh (e.g. the elections of 2014 which were, according to him, not real elections and then BNP backed out so even less of an election). He feels bad for his two sisters still living there but also for the people of Bangladesh in general.

MOST INTERESTING THING: He talked a lot about how there are mostly Sylhetis living in London, he thinks it has a lot to do with the tea trade and Sylhet being part of Assam once.

THIRD WEEK

TYPE III

Shovron (xi)

27/10/2014

Location: Brick Lane milkshake bar

Met through Syed (research outsider n° viii), his flatmate, who was present during the interview

Shovron is a 37 years old that looks about 50, and seems to have the experience and the knowledge about Bangladesh of an elder. He moved to East London eight years ago, but it seems to him that he never really left Bangladesh because he is staying in the “Banglatown” part of East London and hardly ever speaks English.

NEWS: Shovron works as a journalist for the Weekly Bangladesh. At work, they all speak Bengali and the newspaper is also in Bangla. It is a weekly newspaper that they distribute for free (average circulation of about 15.000 every week), especially on Fridays at the Mosque (East London Mosque, but also other mosques, they have three distributors to do that). In his opinion, “the newspaper is not for people who were born and raised here, they would not be interested in that”. The paper is for people who were born in Bangladesh, moved to Banglatown in London and live in a community that is very Bengali. The news that this newspaper conveys is about six pages *Community*, three pages *National News*, three pages *International News* and three pages on *Bangladesh*. So the focus is more on the community in East London than on Bangladesh.

MOST INTERESTING THING: Apart from his experience as a journalist, I found it also very interesting that Shovon turned out to be a Kobiraj. He read the palms of our hands.

Ahmed (xii)

30/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar near Whitechapel Galery

Met through Brick Lane Circle event

I met Ahmed on a lecture organized by Brick Lane Circle, the same night I met Lepina (18). At the time, he claimed he was a British born Bangladeshi. By the time we met up, however, it soon turned out he was not. After about five minutes, he said he was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh, after all, and only came to Britain at the age of five. He then broke off the conversation.

MOST INTERESTING THING: I found it interesting that he first claimed to be British born, when he was not. This has happened on more than one occasion.

OTHER

Ferjana (xiii)

28/10/2014

Location: Coffee bar, Aldgate

Appointment through Salma Begum (research participant n° 6),
Mahmud (research outsider n° iii) and Aisha (research outsider n° vii).
Ferjana is Salma's and Mahmud's colleague.

Cf. **Interview 4**

Ferjana is a second generation Bangladeshi, born in Toulouse, France, living in England (first Newcastle, now London, later on she moved to Southampton).

NEWS: If there is anything on Bangladesh in British or French newspapers, she would pick up on that. Another possibility for her is to receive information through her parents. Otherwise, she doesn't follow it.

MOST INTERESTING THING: She talks about the difference between Dhaka and Sylhet, and also about the difference between being born in France as a Bangladeshi as opposed to being born in Britain. There is a big difference, especially in terms of religion, since according to her, the French (or at least the French living in Toulouse) are not accustomed to Muslims wearing a hijab.

FOURTH WEEK

TYPE III

Alamin **(xiv)**

6/11/2014

Location: Bangladeshi Chinese Restaurant, Whitechapel

Met through Kolsuma Begum, research participant n° 7.

I met Alamin through a mutual friend, Kolsuma, who was sure Alamin was born in Britain, but it turned out he was not. After discussing Bangladesh for a little while, we broke off the conversation.

OTHER

Zohar **(xv)**

4/11/2014

Location: Coffee bar, Paddington

Met through Ferjana Mohamed, research outsider n° xii

Zohar is Ferjana's cousin. was born in England and lived in London, but only moved here to study and was actually born in Manchester. This only became clear at the end of the conversation.

MOST INTERESTING THING: Zohar told me my difficulty in finding research participants could be because of my gender or also because of the subject I was investigating in (cf. chapter 2).

Assan **(xvi)**

6/11/2014

Location: Tower Hamlets Town Hall, his place of employment

Met in the Youth Centre on Mile End, when he was coming by with his son.

Assan is a first generation migrant who turned out to be actually Assamese. This did not stop us from discussing his work in Tower Hamlets and his identity.

NEWS: He stays informed on Assamese news.

MOST INTERESTING THING: I found it interesting that he first claimed to be Sylheti, when he is not. Since Sylhet has been a part of Assam in the past, and most Bangladeshi living in London are Sylheti, it was an easy mistake to make. Still, I found it rather curious.

FIFTH WEEK

TYPE III

Jabin (xvii)

10/11/2014

Location: Khatun family home, Angel

Met through Nasmin Ali, research participant n° 1.

Cf. **Interview 10**

Jabin is one of the many sisters I met during my visit to the Khatun family home, two days before my departure. She was the oldest one present. Jabin arrived late but immediately participated in the conversation. She even called her sisters and sisters-in-law out when they talk about their bond with Bangladesh and with whom they remain in touch (and why), she says: “Why are you guys saying stuff? It’s recording, it’s not the truth.” It is very easy to tell that she is the older sister. Because of this, she is a bit more traditional. When she talks about women’s education, she thinks of it more in terms of finding a husband (and, if you were to get divorced, “at least you have something to fall back on”), although this is not necessarily how she lives her life: “I’m not saying I want to sit at home, but I just want that option”.

NEWS: Her husband – who is “fresh” from Bangladesh and then got legalized – follows the news, but she finds it “boring”: “All of that politics rubbish”.

MOST INTERESTING THING: After some time, the subject of identity came up during the focus group. Jabin literally said she was born in England, and only when her sister denied it, she realized she was not. I found this very interesting, especially since it happened on more than one occasion.

ANNEX III: PARTICIPATION FORMS

The participation forms included as an annex to this dissertation are to be perceived as the official written consent of my participants' willingness to have been a part of this research. Moreover, they contain basic information important for the analysis of the participants' data.

Most importantly, they also give some insight into the way the participants perceive their identity, as the form includes a ranking exercise. The participants were handed these forms immediately after the interview. This implies that the participants ought to have been triggered to consciously think about their identity before filling out the ranking exercise. The exercise can therefore not be seen as unbiased.

One more problem with these forms, is the fact that this annex includes participation forms from only eleven out of eighteen participants. Seven participants refrained from filling in these forms, and, as I have explained in my methodology, for that reason I have not used their full name anywhere in this dissertation. Also, as not everyone has filled them in, they lack importance and cannot be used to draw conclusions from.

These two obstacles did not impede me from using the forms in my dissertation. However, I only used them to back up the participants' own words. In other words, while I did take advantage of the extra data these participation forms presented me, I only used them to solidify my argument, not to construct a new one.

WEEK 2: 20/10 UNTIL 26/10

Participant n° 1 (interview 1)	xcviii
Participant n° 2 (interview 1)	xcix
Participant n° 3 (interview 2)	c
Participant n° 4 (interview 2)	ci
Participant n° 5 (interview 3)	cii

WEEK 3: 27/10 UNTIL 2/11

Participant n° 6 (interview 4)	ciii
Participant n° 7 (interview 5)	civ
Participant n° 8 (interview 6)	cv

WEEK 4: 3/11 UNTIL 9/11

Participant n° 9 (interview 7) ¹	cvi
Participant n° 11 (interview 9)	cvi

WEEK 5: 10/11 UNTIL 12/11

Participant n° 18 (interview 12)	cvi
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¹ Jamshid made a mistake while filling in his participation form: from analysing both his interview and the results on the form, it becomes clear that he meant 'highest' by 10 and 'lowest' by 1.